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## Approaches to personal transformation in tourism research

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### ABSTRACT

The study of tourism transformation is evolving with five different research streams identifiable, studying personal transformation, social transformation, transformative service design, and transformation related to destinations or tourism as a whole. This paper examines the evolution of these five approaches and contrasts their disciplines, theory and assumptions through a review of 310 journal articles. Each of these five approaches views the 'self' as the object that is transformed with variations within them as to what aspects of the self change. The key issue then is how the self is interrelated with the 'triggers' of transformation. In this review, three triggers commonly identified (meaning, emotion, and reflection) are examined in detail. Understanding how personal transformation occurs is vital as topics, such as experience design, transformative tourism services and societal transformation are based on this.

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Cognitive psychology; emotion; meaning; personal transformation; reflection; transformative tourism

## Introduction

A number of societal trends are converging which emphasise the importance of understanding if, and how, travellers are changed by their journeys and tourism experiences. Firstly, personal transformation is a core discourse of the tourism industry (Bruner, 1991) that is echoed in popular books and films (Harrill et al., 2022; Sampaio, 2014). Secondly, personal transformation is seen as a societal trend leading to an experience economy that delivers memorable, or indeed transformative experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2013). Thirdly, in the face of existential threats, such as climate change, and calls for societal changes to address inequality, justice and peace, researchers have sought to use tourism-related activities as a partial solution. This has underpinned research into the design of transformative experiences (Sheldon, 2020) and events (Celuch & Neuhofer, 2025a, 2025b). Such experiences are designed to achieve both personal and societal transformation for travellers, local residents of tourism destinations and employees. Transformative services researchers seek to improve the life of target groups, including those with dementia (Page et al., 2023) or disabilities (Tao et al., 2025).

Transformation has been reviewed from many perspectives indicating the broad scope of research in this area. Some ten previous literature reviews have been identified (Table 1) that focus on particular theories, such as *transformative learning theory* (Cámara et al., 2023; Rus et al., 2022; Stone & Duffy, 2015; Stone & Petrick, 2013), or topics, including *well-being* (Huang et al., 2024), *regenerative paradigm shift* (Taveras-Dalmau, 2025), *co-created transformation* (Teoh et al., 2021), *transformative experiences* (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023), *meaningful experiences* (Cámara et al., 2023), and *film* (Harrill et al., 2022).

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**Table 1.** Previous literature reviews on transformation and related topics in tourism.

Focus of paper	Source	Theoretical focus	Definition of transformation	Type of review
Educational travel	Stone and Petrick (2013)	Educational Psychology – Experiential Learning and Existential Philosophy	'dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world'	Systematic literature review
Transformative Learning Theory	Stone and Duffy (2015)	Transformative Learning Theory	... 'taken-for-granted frames of reference (e.g. meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets)' are modified and become more 'inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective' ... 'a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions ... a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world' Change in '... one's view of the world and the lens through which one views the world are changed.'	Systematic literature review
Co-created transformative tourism experiences	Teoh et al. (2021)	Consumer Experience design	Transformative tourism experiences (TE), occur when consumers subsume staged experiences, potentially prompting life-changing actualisations	Systematic narrative review
Travel expressed in film	Harrill et al. (2022)	Philosophical Pragmatism Critical Hermeneutics	... 'enlightenment engendered by travel simply increases self-awareness about life or recognising those social and cultural constraints that keep us from reaching our human potential.'	Narrative review
Transformational tourism	Nandasena et al., (2022)	Existential Philosophy	transformational tourism as tourism that delivers 'very rich and very deep sensual and emotional transformational experiences that enable people to achieve their full potential as unique and authentic human being' (source: [Reisinger, 2013] related to existential authenticity)	Bibliographic systematic literature review
Transformative Tourism	Rus et al. (2022)	Educational Psychology Mezirow	No definition provided	Bibliographic systematic literature review
Meaningful experiences	Cámara et al. (2023)	Educational Psychology Mezirow	... 'transformational experiences are associated with self-realisation and self-exploration ... that lead to an individual's inner transformation in values, beliefs, intentions and self-perceptions.'	Systematic literature review
Tourists' transformative experience	Zhao and Agyeiwaah (2023)	None	[W]hen an individual feels that she/he has changed as the result of an encounter, a transformative experience takes place'	Systematic literature review
Transformative event experiences	Celuch and Neuhofer (2025)	Transformative Experiences	'disruption of existing structures or a person's realities' (p. 486)	Brief state of the art review
Regenerative paradigm	Taveras-Dalmau (2025)	Inner Regenerative Development Framework	values, worldviews, beliefs and associated emotional, relational, and cognitive capacities, fundamental for systems change	Systematic literature review

Other reviews have highlighted the disciplines used to study transformation in the diverse types of tourism, for instance *pilgrimage* (Devereux & Carnegie, 2006; Zheng et al., 2024), *volunteering* (Brown, 2009; Knollenberg et al., 2014; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017), *backpacking* (Bosangit et al., 2015; Canavan, 2018; Noy, 2004), *dark tourism* (Magee & Gilmore, 2015; Soulard et al., 2023; Zhuo et al., 2024), *solo travel* (Nguyen & Hsu, 2023) and *study abroad* (Cavender et al., 2020; Jin & Robledo, 2024; Milstein, 2005).

The end result is that the literature examines a number of different topics (objects) and contexts of transformation in tourism, using a variety of theories and paradigms, contributing to a messy and confused research domain. This lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework leads to mixed and scattered research conclusions with blurry conceptual boundaries. Such factors induce inappropriate use of concepts (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023), and the little conceptual clarity surrounding the parameters of transformation contributes to the challenge of distinguishing it from broader change processes (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). Hence the a growing need to disentangle this research domain. In particular, as will be seen below, the topic of personal transformation ultimately rests on an understanding of how an individual is transformed. There is a lack of knowledge about the processes of individual transformation (Agapito & Sigala, 2024), which requires an in-depth understanding of how inner transformation can occur (Amaro et al., 2024).

This review seeks to answer three questions that inquire into three interrelated issues of transformation, namely: object, dimension and processes. More specifically, the first question is (1) *what types of objects are studied in the transformation literature?* This question is important because five different levels of 'object' transformation are identified, four primarily related to an external or management perspective (destinations, tourism sectors, services and society) and the last internal, corresponding to personal transformation. Disentangling these research streams allows the literature on personal transformation to be delineated.

The next question is (2) *what about a person transforms during personal transformation?* A common answer to this is that aspects of the self change (see Table 1). While this may seem obvious, what is less evident is what about a 'self' changes and how these types of changes are embedded in the discipline and theory used in the study. Research framed by existential philosophy looks for changes in existential authenticity following Heidegger's or Kierkegaard's philosophical lenses, while sociology-informed research inquires about changes, either applying the postmodern theories of society and the social construction of knowledge of Foucault (1973), or late modernity frameworks, like that of Giddens (1991). Psychologists, in turn, have their own theories varying in the importance given to individual or social processes, while cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists investigate brain processes and neurological structure supporting the self.

The third question is (3) *what are the common processes of transformation of the self as discussed in the literature?* These are identified as *meaning making*, *reflection*, and *emotion*. A brief discussion of the relationship between these processes and transformation is then provided that may serve as a guide to further research on this key topic.

## Methodology

This study reviews the literature related to personal transformation during travel using a *two-step hybrid* methodology (Teoh et al., 2021). The hybrid approach is considered adequate to bridge the limitations of both SLR and narrative reviews, and it was chosen in this study due to the diffuse literature on tourism transformation and, accordingly, the need to contribute with interpretive richness by looking at relevant articles (Teoh et al., 2021). The topic of investigation is not well defined with numerous streams of literature overlapping, including transformative management and services, destination transformation, specific niche areas as pilgrimage, study abroad, solo women's travel, volunteering, spiritual travel, and related topics as wellness and meaningful

**Table 2.** Review steps.

Step	# in scope
1. Scopus: <i>Tourism</i> and <i>transform*</i> (not leadership) (666 results)	151
2. Web of Science: ( <i>Tourism</i> OR <i>Hospitality</i> OR <i>Events</i> OR <i>Leisure</i> ) AND <i>transform*</i> (not leadership) (692 results)	167
3. Combine 1 and 2 and eliminate duplicates and non-journal papers	205
4. Paper reading in 3 and include relevant cited journal papers	311

travel. This method combines the strengths of two complementary methods, a systematic literature review (SLR) and a narrative review.

Thus, a SLR process using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis) method (Moher et al., 2009) was first performed to collect articles containing selected keywords. This was followed by a second step where relevant articles cited in these papers were identified and included in the analysis if they discussed transformation in their text. This allowed the review to be inclusive, i.e. not restricted only to papers using the keyword *transform\** in their titles, abstracts or keywords, and reach a deeper level of interpretation.

After defining the review's questions, the recommended second step in an SLR is to delimit the scope of the study using keywords that reflect the concept of interest. Previous studies have identified that terminology used to indicate transformative outcomes include *self-discovery*, *self-development*, *empowerment* as well as *personal transformation* (Nguyen & Luong, 2025). However, the definition of transformation is contested and so classifying in-scope articles proved problematic. For example, Cámara et al. (2023) and Bastiaansen and Duerden (2024) discuss 'meaningfulness' gained from travel but refer to personal transformation in the text. In other cases, journals not indexed in the databases searched, such as *Tourism and Management Studies*, published by the University of Algarve, Portugal, were identified (Cetin & Pala, 2022). Further, as will be discussed, there are related topics, such as transformative tourism services (Christie & Mason, 2003) and transformative event design (Neuhofer et al., 2020), that discuss personal transformation as a means to achieve particular purposes. Finally, transformation can be used to mean *growth* or *change* and applied to destinations (Alahakoon et al., 2021; Simoni, 2014) or tourism sectors (Kim & Yang, 2023). These have been included in the analysis when there is a link to personal transformation, to allow a clearer overview of the extent and development of the topic but have been separated for purposes of interpretation. The result of this process is the inclusion of papers that did not have *transform\** in their title, abstract or keywords, but did in the body of the paper.

An open-ended search in Scopus and Web of Science was conducted in February 2025, using the keyword *transform\** and *tourism*. After deduplication and selecting only journal articles, 205 articles remained. Previous studies using a similar method found fewer articles. Nandasena et al. (2022) identified 82 articles for the period to July 2020, Zhao and Agyeiwaah (2023) found 67 studies up till December 2021, and Rus et al. (2022) identified 156 to May 2023. All 205 papers were read and relevant citations were accessed and included in the database if they referred to personal transformation within the text. This led to the identification of 106 additional papers (see Table 2) and the final list of 311 articles is provided in Appendix 1.

Citation details of all papers were placed in an *Endnote* database along with a copy of the paper in pdf. format. In line with the research questions, these were then categorised based on (1) *what type of object* was being transformed, (2) *what type of personal transformation* occurred, and (3) *common triggers* (associated mental processes) linked to transformation.

## Results

In overview, the in-scope articles reflect a topic that has become a significant focus of research only recently. The three main journals are *Annals of Tourism Research* (37), *Tourism Recreation Research*

(18), and *Current Issues in Tourism* (17) (Appendix 2 Table 1). There has been a significant increase in articles since 2021 (Appendix 2 Table 2).

### **Q1: Five types of transformation articles**

Of the 311 journal papers focusing on transformation and tourism (broadly), five main types of articles were found. Around two thirds of the papers (208) examined individual-level transformation. However, other groups were identified that discussed societal (49), design/transformational services (29) or sector (14) or destination (11) level transformation primarily from the perspective of how to design or implement transformational tourism.

#### ***Destination and sector (25)***

Destination transformation (11 papers) examines how destinations change over time. Examples include the development of the *favela* as a tourist attraction (Frisch, 2012), the marketing of Kerala as a spiritual destination (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019), or attractive attributes of transformational destinations (Alahakoon et al., 2021). In a similar way, a number of papers discussed the tourism industry (Hollinshead, 2009) or sectors, such as the development of transformational events (Neuhofer et al., 2024), volunteer tourism (Eckardt et al., 2022) or hospitality (Inversini et al., 2024).

#### ***Design approach (29)***

The move towards a 'transformational economy' was predicted by Pine and Gilmore (1999) as the successor to the experience economy, whereby experiences would allow consumers to realise their aspirations and transform themselves. This is reflected in the tourism literature in the experience design stream of literature. According to this approach, if tourism businesses are to remain competitive by responding to consumer needs and aspirations, an effective strategy is to design experiences that allow tourists to achieve certain outcomes – notably extraordinary, memorable, or transformational experiences (Duerden et al., 2018). The third topic concerns *design* of tourism products/experiences for various transformational outcomes. An early paper by Christie and Mason (2003) described how critically reflexive practitioners can transform their interpretation and giving 'tourists a chance to change their own values' (p. 14). More recently, there has been a focus on the design of events to achieve outcomes supporting the purpose economy (Higgins-Desbiolles & Monga, 2020), human connectivity and conscious reflective practice (Gustavo et al., 2022; Neuhofer et al., 2021), more sustainable food choices and pro-environmental attitudes (Yachin et al., 2025) and well-being (Johansen & Konu, 2025). The *design perspective* has recently included co-design (co-creation) of tourism services (Teoh et al., 2021). The *transformational experience design* approach moves from studying the factors affecting transformation to designing for them in tourism services (Neuhofer & Dulbecco, 2024; Neuhofer et al., 2021)

This *design* approach overlaps with transformational service and social transformation-focused papers. The transformational services agenda concerns design to achieve some 'larger' purpose apart from simply providing a service. In 2006, there was a call by the president of the *Association for Consumer Research* for transformational research, meaning 'investigations that are framed by a fundamental problem or opportunity, and that strive to respect, uphold, and improve life in relation to the myriad conditions, demands, potentialities, and effects of consumption' (Mick, 2006, p. 5).

Later, a group of service researchers similarly encouraged 'service researchers to engage in research activities that promote human well-being' (Rosenbaum et al., 2011, p. 1). Decrop et al. (2018) introduced the transformational service research perspective to tourism. Papers of this type include that by Sheldon (2020), which discussed designing experiences for expanded consciousness and design of dementia-friendly outdoor experiences (Page et al., 2023). The *transformational services* agenda also emphasises the role of academics in transforming society (Pernecky, 2020) and in developing a sustainable social system (Lupini et al., 2025). Some transformational tourism studies focus on transformational education (Carnicelli & Boluk, 2017; Hayes & Tucker, 2022), developing a decolonial

paradigm (Bellato, Frantzeskaki, Lee et al., 2023), regenerative tourism (Cave et al., 2022), just and sustainable tourism (Pritchard et al., 2011),

### **Social transformation (49)**

In this category, papers examine how tourism contributes to achieve both individual and social transformation (Neuhofer, 2025; Sheldon, 2020). In the late 80s, it was suggested that tourism could be an agent of peace (D'Amore, 1988). A group of researchers conducted four studies examining the impact of tourism on the attitudes of those travelling to countries that had a tradition of hostile relations with their own albeit with no significant changes in attitude (Pizam, 1996). One explanation provided was related to lack of contact with local people. Later research, as embedded in anthropology or sociology, noted the effect of tourism on the identity of people in local communities (Bruner, 1991; Cone, 1995). In the 2000s, some authors began to study how tourism affects social activism or particular desirable outcomes. McGehee (2002) examined how participation as an *Earthwatch* expedition volunteer affected social movement activities. The results indicate that the development of network ties (but not self-efficacy) increased motivation and intentions for future activism.

Here, transformation is, therefore, considered a personal growth-enhancing and developmental change with potentially wide societal implications (Wolf et al., 2017). There are a variety of societal outcomes targeted, such as a more cosmopolitan outlook (Swain, 2009), a desire to contribute to the greater good (Sheldon, 2020), regime change (Pritchard et al., 2011) and radical change (Ross, 2010). This stream of research also overlaps with the transformative services literature discussed above. For example, Galeone and Sebastiani (2021) discussed the potential of tourism and hospitality businesses to improve individual and collective well-being. Pritchard et al. (2011) examined the hopeful tourism agenda which focuses on co-transformation.

The social transformation stream also overlaps with regenerative tourism [see Taveras-Dalmau (2025), for a review]. This is 'a transformational approach that aims to fulfil the potential of tourism places to flourish and create net positive effects through increasing the regenerative capacity of human societies and ecosystems' (Bellato, Frantzeskaki, & Nygaard, 2023, p. 1036) cited in (Taveras-Dalmau, 2025). Soulard et al. (2021) use *Interaction Ritual Chains* theory to identify the primary forms of symbolism that are the most appealing to prospective transformative tourists. This study is a good example of how transformative tourism researchers are seeking processes that lead tourists to become 'agents of change as a result of their transformative tourism experience, advocating for social empowerment and environmental protection in their community' (p. 103). Here the authors seek to achieve change in *self-identity*. Dredge (2022) provides a model of five levels of transformative change and highlights leverage points. The first level is the individual followed by relationships, organisation, system or sector and global system.

### **Personal transformation and its evolution (208)**

The above discussion has sought to describe four streams of literature that discuss transformation. As shown in Table 3, these can be classified into two main types, managerial and individual. Individual-level studies examine aspects of the transformation of persons, while managerially oriented studies seek to design or develop services or systems to achieve certain extra-personal objectives.

**Table 3.** Number of papers identified by category.

Type of transformation	Level	Number
Individual level transformation	Individual	208
Social level transformation	Managerial	49
Designing services for transformation	Managerial	29
Transforming tourism as a whole or sector	Managerial	14
Destination transformation	Managerial	11
Total		<b>311</b>

**Table 4.** The self in psychology theory.

Theory	The self is ...
Psychoanalytic theory	a self-system inflicted with conflict
Behavioural theory	a bundle of conditioned responses
Phenomenology	a wholistic form
Cognitive theory	a conceptual system processing information about the self

Source: Sirgy (1982, p. 287).

It is argued here that achievement of managerial transformation is dependent on understanding of personal transformation. The analysis now turns to the literature on personal transformation.

Tourism has been associated with personal transformation since its beginning as a field of study. Indeed, MacCannell (1973) discussed transformation as a search for authenticity which is the motive for all travel. Graburn (1977) likened tourism to a sacred journey, inherently transformational and a tourist is unsuccessful if not changed. Cohen (1979) argued that there are a number of reasons for travel of which existential exploration is only one. Bruner (1991) viewed transformation from travel as a Western tourism narrative and that (most) tourists do not change but instead reinforce their (privileged) identities.

In these early discussions, based on anthropology and sociology, *transformation* refers to the traveller and their identity. The theories used to explain the causes of transformation in a travellers' identity derive from these disciplines. These explanations of why transformation occurs reflect theories of the nature of society and of the self emerged from those disciplines. For example, Bruner (1991), an anthropologist, adopted a postmodern view. Cone (1995), on the other hand, adopts a late-modernity view, and discussed by Giddens (1991), where identity is developed through individual choices. Wearing and Wearing (2001, p. 144) write:

Sociological theory concerning the self has moved in recent years away from an internalised consistent and rational 'I' propagated along with the certainties of modernity towards a fragmented, decentred notion of many selves constructed according to the changing discourses of post-modernity.

Post-modernity leads to a fluid and flexible identity as a consequence of the fragmentation of social structure. This post-modern view was later challenged by Giddens (1991) who emphasised individual agency and choice. Giddens' narrative approach to identity is developed in a 'subjectively experienced life story, taking into account the various dimensions of social and cultural engagement' (Phillips, 2019, p. 21). Similarly, Sirgy (1982, p. 287) identifies the different formulations of the self in psychology theory (Table 4).

A detailed discussion of all the theories and their definitions and assumptions about the 'self' is beyond the scope of this paper and the reader is referred to specialist papers on this topic (Baumeister, 2010; Cohen, 2010; Todd, 2001; Wearing & Wearing, 2001). However, it is clear that, throughout the disciplines used to study it, *transformation is a change in identity and self* (see Table 5). Each theory defines self/identity/role/person differently, and why identities change is dependent on the specific discipline and theory. Part of the complexity of the transformation literature is that disciplines (and theoretical positions within them) have different conceptualisations of self, role, identity and related terms.

## Q2 What about the self transforms?

Previous reviews have provided detailed lists of types of personal transformation outcomes. Teoh et al. (2021) grouped these into four types, namely, *psychological, physical, social* and *knowledge*. Nandasena et al. (2022) adds a fifth, which is *action*. These are all elements of the self (Table 5). What about the self changes varies by discipline. For example, educational psychologists using *transformative learning theory* (Mezirow, 2000) focus on changes in the self's habitual *patterns of thought*. Postmodern sociologists focus on *roles* (Bruner, 1991) while cognitive psychologists focus on *memory structures* (Bastiaansen & Duerden, 2024).

**Table 5.** Definitions of transformation and transformative tourism.

Discipline/ approach	Transformation	Authors	Theoretical framework	What changes
Educational Psychology	The process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; <i>changing these structures of habitual expectation</i> to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings (p. 39).	Roberson (2002)	Mezirow (1991)	structures of habitual expectation
Educational Psychology	'Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world' (p. 719)	Coghlan and Gooch (2011)	Mezirow (1991)	basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions
Existential Philosophy	'Changes in existential authenticity and anxiety' (p. 638) 'A greater awareness of existential concerns and heightened sensitivity to existential anxiety' (p. 648)	Kirillova et al. (2017a)	Existential authenticity (Heidegger, 1962)	existential authenticity and anxiety
Anthropology	'... A new and different person.' '... a total transformation of self.' (p. 239) 'Native self may gain more, in the sense of expanding more and changing more, than the tourist self' (p. 246)	Bruner (1991)	Postmodernism (Foucault, 1973) (Said, 1978)	self, identity
Sociology	'Reject(ed) the traditional woman's Mayan role' ... constructed ... their identities, their life stories ... and 'transformed ... power relationships' (p. 325).	Cone (1995)	Late-modernity (Giddens, 1991)	role, identities, life stories
Sociology	Theoretical view of 'true inner self' as socially constructed and culturally contingent, ... selves are relational and situationally mediated, ... compared to 'essentialist reading of it as an innate inner object' (p. 129).	Cohen (2010)	Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1972) Performance (Goffman, 1956) Late-modernity (Giddens, 1991)	relational self
Environmental Psychology	'A process of change in an individual's self (self-confidence, personality, outlook on life and others) and actions (conation) triggered by cognitive and affective stimulation from a significant experience; cognition being opinions, thoughts, and beliefs on self and the environment, affect being emotional reactions to self and the environment, and conation being behavioural intentions	Tasci and Godovykh (2021)	Stimulus-Organism-Response (S – O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) Big Five Personality traits (Matthews et al., 2003)	Self (self-confidence, personality, outlook on life and others and actions)

(Continued)

Table 5. Continued.

Discipline/ approach	Transformation	Authors	Theoretical framework	What changes
	about self and the environment.' (p. 4) 'defined as a positive change in self, thoughts, feelings, and behavior that lead to new values, self-definition, and responsible behavior triggered by transformative tourism experiences' (p. 2).			
Psychology	'Transformation of self " ... " by using travel to promote and clarify motivations' (p. 24).	Kottler (1998)	Process of self-change	self-esteem, self-confidence, and well-being
Psychology	'A rather permanent change in the state of mind or body or the way of life of the subject' (p. 34)	(Aho, 2001)	(Pine & Gilmore, 1999)	Mind, body or way of life
Psychology	Identity refers to 'a self-structure – an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organisation of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history' (p. 2).	Zhuo et al. (2025)	Identity development theory (Luyckx et al., 2006)	Identity
Psychology	'... enlightenment' ... or 'a critical awareness of the self, leading to a new self-definition' (p. 14).	Godovykh and Tasci (2025)	Personality and change (Wagner et al., 2020)	Personality
Leisure Psychology	An experience where the objective elements engage an individual's attention and produce subjective reactions involving strong emotions, the discovery of significant and personally relevant insights, and personal changes in values, beliefs, intentions, or self-perceptions. Most often transformative experiences are characterised by intrinsically motivated, enduring changes in self-perception and behaviour (p. 208)	Duerden et al. (2018)	Structured experiences (Duerden et al., 2015)	self-perception and behaviour
Cognitive Psychology	Individuals integrate new and meaningful insights into their autobiographical memory ... or even into their identity narrative	Bastiaansen and Duerden (2024)	self-defining life narratives (McAdams & McLean, 2013)	Identity narrative
Other – design Experience Economy – design	'Tourism experiences that lead to tourists' transformation, such as changes in one's self-understanding, revision of one's belief system and alterations in one's behaviour and lifestyle (p. 3).	Chirakranont and Sakdiyakorn (2022)	(Pine & Gilmore, 1999)	self-understanding, belief system, behaviour and lifestyle
Transformative tourism Interpretation	'The practice of organised tourism that leads to a positive change in <i>attitudes and values</i> among those who participate in the tourist experience' (p. 9).	Christie and Mason (2003).	Interpretation Prentice (1996) cited in Christie and Mason (2003)	attitudes and values
Education	'Inner' psychological development or growth (p. 247)	Morgan (2010)	Mezirow (1991)	worldview

(Continued)

**Table 5.** Continued.

Discipline/ approach	Transformation	Authors	Theoretical framework	What changes
Positive psychology	'Experiences inner peace and freedom, a sense of flow, transcendence of the small self, connection with something greater, but also a desire to contribute to the greater good (p. 1).	Sheldon (2020)	Various	enlightened state
Sociology	'A process' where tourists engage in an inner journey that 'is part of the awakening of consciousness, and creates more self-awareness, more self-inquiry into the purpose of life, living by a higher set of values, and making greater contributions to others' (p. 103)	Soulard et al. (2021)	Interaction Ritual Chains theory (Collins, 2004)	Cultural, ecological and social impacts of services (Soulard et al., 2021, p. 103). tourists become agents of change (Soulard et al., 2021, p. 103)
Complex Systems	'Inner transformation as an awakening of individual consciousness, an inner human journey preceding social and environmental awakening' (p. 6).	Taveras-Dalmau (2025)	Whole-living systems thinking	individual consciousness

Each of these outcomes has its own rich literature and here the analysis is focused on *personality* to illustrate some problematic issues. A number of authors have mentioned changes in *personality* as an outcome of transformation (Cetin & Pala, 2022; Decrop et al., 2018; Godovykh & Tasci, 2025; Pearce & Foster, 2007). Tasci and Godovykh (2021) have investigated changes in *personality traits* from a psychological perspective, based on the 'five-factor model of personality' (McAdams & Pals, 2006). At issue is that these authors adopt an *environmental psychology* theory developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) – the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model. In this, a stimulus in the environment triggers an individual to think and feel positively or negatively, thus leading to an approach or avoidance behaviour. The consequence of this model places the cause of transformation outside the traveller and hence leads Tasci and Godovykh (2021) to look for external causes or 'triggers' of transformation. The use of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model to explain the mechanism of higher-order cognition has been criticised (Scott et al., 2024) and is found inconsistent with a cognitive psychology view on the workings of the human mind. Further, the *Big-5 model* captures and measures the trait-relevant aspects of the personal self, but arguably 'fails to capture many other important aspects of the self, including its organisational structure and features of the relational, social, and collective self' (Robins et al., 2010). Thus, changes in personality traits based on the SOR model lead to transformation being seen as externally caused. This is at odds with transformation being an individuality-motivated process. Further, it focuses on 'broad traits of personality, such as those encompassed within the Big Five framework, and ignores more specific selves, identities, and social roles that people assume and construct in their daily lives' (McAdams et al., 2021, p. 5).

### Q3 What triggers transformation?

Motivation is the first of the common processes found in the literature. The majority position is that *transformation* is internally *motivated*. Early writers, such as Crompton (1979), noted that exploration and evaluation of the self is one of several motives for a vacation. Cohen (1979) discerned the experiential, experimental and existential tourist as seeking, to a lesser or greater extent, a movement 'toward the centres of other cultures and societies' (p. 183). Likewise, Godovykh (2024) identifies a

'need for transformation' as a primary motive for travel (p. 4), Alahakoon et al. (2021) write that 'a ready and conscious mindset for change is required for transformations to be triggered' (p. 845). Thus, motivation is reflected in the initial mindset of the traveller before embarking on a journey and this influences the transformation process (Aho, 2001; Lean, 2012).

On the other hand, Kirillova et al. (2017a) found that their respondents did not travel for a transformation of self, but did have a motive, a deficiency in their lives or a need to experience freedom and alternative possibilities in their lives. Similarly, Decrop et al. (2018) found that *couchsurfers* had utilitarian motives (but a shared ethos) and yet experienced transformation in beliefs, attitudes and values, as well as in personality traits (open-mindedness).

Bastiaansen and Duerden (2024) discuss an intermediate position. In cognitive psychology, a person's goals 'prime' individuals to pay attention to certain cues in the environment, but this does not guarantee that these cues are present in a particular situation. Indeed, a person's goals may not be available to conscious thought. When a traveller's personal circumstances are open to question, they may be primed to search for an answer (Desforges, 2000; Teoh et al., 2021). These highlight the importance of designing experiences by personalising them, focussing on the traveller's personal goals, as well as physical and emotional states (Bosangit et al., 2015).

### **Triggers and causality**

Many papers refer to potentiality or conditionality when referring to factors that affect transformation. This potentiality is often referred to as a 'trigger'. For example, Zhuo et al. (2025) identify two broad categories of triggers: *personal factors* (the majority) and *destination factors*, including factors related to the experience itself. Destination factors cover cultural or social novelty. Personal factors comprehend cognition, challenges, and emotions. Cognitive triggers include reflection and meaning making. Similar lists are found in prior literature reviews (Table 6). A first observation is that triggers are generally seen as dependent on some characteristic of the traveller experiencing them to have an effect. They are conditional. This is inconsistent with SOR theory or paradigms where the environment is causal. A second observation is that Table 6 provides a list of conditions that are more likely to lead to transformation and therefore a model of transformation should explain why these are potentialities and not others.

### **Reflexivity (self-reflection)**

In the previous section, it is established that (1) the focus of transformation is change in the self. Selfhood is fundamentally about how a subject ('I') relates to itself as an object ('me'). Baumeister (2010, p. 142) identifies three characteristics of the self, which are: (1) 'reflexive consciousness' in which the self is aware of itself and builds a stock of knowledge about itself; (2) 'interpersonal relationships' whereby the self is formed in interactions and relationships with other people, and (3) 'agency' being about 'making choices and exerting control'.

Reflection involves reflexively thinking about personal experiences (self-reflection) and making sense of what they mean. This process is especially important if leads to changes in aspects of the self (Pung et al., 2020). If an experience is seen to involve some facet of a tourist's personal development and transformation they become more meaningful (Cámara et al., 2023). Bastiaansen and Duerden (2024) identify connection, goals and fulfilment, contribution, and growth as the dimensions on which people define the meaning in life. Similarly, existential transformation is about meaning (Kirillova et al., 2017a) and a tourist's reflection and interpretation of experience is the key trigger of transformative experience (Kirillova et al., 2017a; Tasci & Godovykh, 2021; Teoh et al., 2021; Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023). Reflection is also connected to the novelty of the experience. Transformation can be 'brought about by a novel event that is sufficiently challenging that it requires radical self-examination' (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018, p. 571).

Reflection often occurs when telling stories to others and thus is not necessarily a solitary action. This fits with the concept of a narrative identity. Noy (2004) writes that 'it is precisely the interpersonal communication of personal narratives that grants the individual self-reflection, on

**Table 6.** Factors commonly associated with transformation in literature reviews in tourism studies.

	Personal Motivation	Cultural immersion/connection with locals or others	Unknown, unfamiliar places novelty	Risk, challenge	Emotion	Landscape	Reflection
Rus et al. (2022)	Initial mindset Authenticity	Social dynamics and communitas	Risk, challenge and novelty	Risk, challenge	Emotions during peak experiences	Setting and destination	Self-reflection
Zhao and Agyeiwaah (2023)	Authenticity	Interaction and trust	Challenges and unknowns	Challenge	Emotions	Setting, environment, surroundings, sphere, conditions	-
Nandasena et al. (2022)	Novelty seeking, escapism, self-development. Disorienting dilemma	Local culture and residents, Cross-cultural learning, social relationships, connection with others			Joyful		Self-reflection/self-examination
Teoh et al. (2021)	Motivations	Social dynamics	Novelty	Risk, challenge, safety.	Emotion	Landscape	Cognition

simultaneously psychological and social levels' (p. 84). Reflection is seen as critical in the process of developing a behavioural response to the wildlife tourism experience (Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011). *Reflective engagement* describes the cognitive and/or affective processing of the experience (Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011, p. 1247). Activities that promote the process of critical reflection include journal writing, life histories, case studies, critical incidents, idea writing, small group discussion, role playing (Christie & Mason, 2003). Self-reflection is the key factor in stimulating transformation, and diverse reflective directions produce different (hedonic vs. eudaimonic) results (Lengieza et al., 2021).

Nguyen and Hsu (2023) define 'self-reflection' as 'an active thought process requiring self-examination arising from an action or experience and leading to a new understanding or appreciation of a concept, principle or ideal, thus creating a pathway to self-learning' (p. 4). Some examples of tangible actions inducing reflexivity include travel writing or blogging (Bosangit et al., 2015), photo-taking (Belk & Hsiu-yen Yeh, 2011), or buying souvenirs (Fedele, 2014). Likewise, intangible actions like the narration of experiences to friends and family (Nada et al., 2018), through the general public (using blogs), or even towards researchers during interviews, are forms of reflexivity that occur post-experience (Mkono, 2016). The reflective process involved in tourism transformation is intricate and time-consuming (Nandasena et al., 2022).

### **Emotion**

A transformative tourism experience (TTE) is commonly associated with emotional responses (Tasci & Godovykh, 2021). Kirillova et al. (2017b) write that triggering episodes are accompanied by intense emotions of positive or negative valence. It appears that emotions are linked to deeper, more meaningful and permanent transformational change (Dillette et al., 2019; Freidus & Caro, 2021; Yu et al., 2023). Teoh et al. (2021) discuss the need to better understand emotions. Indeed, one of the main critiques of Mezirow (1991, 2000) is that his focus was strongly on rational thinking, and emotional aspects within transformative learning processes were largely ignored [see Taylor (2001), for discussion of memory, emotions and feelings].

Despite the importance of emotions, there are few discussions of why emotions are related to transformation. Bastiaansen and Duerden (2024) note that the process whereby emotions are felt during an experience leads to memory production. However, they do not mention that emotional valence and arousal are dependent on a person's goals, as discussed in cognitive appraisal theory.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Transformation is acknowledged as a topic of increasing interest in tourism studies due to a number of reasons, including the contribution of tourism experiences to deliver higher personal value to tourists (Pine & Gilmore, 2013) or augment awareness of current societal problems and threats (Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011). This growth in publications in tourism has seen correspondingly an expansion of research paradigms, disciplines, and theories used to investigate transformation in tourism experiences. This process has led to the coexistence of scattered research findings lacking theoretical coherence and conceptual clarity, eventually producing a messy research domain.

Contributing to elucidate this research domain, this review on personal transformation and tourism in tourism studies asked:

1. What types of objects are studied in the transformation literature (object)?
2. What about a person transforms in personal transformation (dimension)?
3. What are the common triggers that are discussed in the literature (process)?

The answer to (1) is that *there are two main perspectives on transformation*, one that examines personal transformation and another that seeks to design/use the personal transformation process to

achieve various outcomes, such as societal transformation. The answer to (2) is that *the 'self' changes but this hides the different theories and definitions of the self*. There are a wide variety of characteristics of the 'self' that change. The answer to (3) is that *the common processes of transformation are motivation or goal seeking, emotion and self-reflection*.

The transformation literature consists primarily of the application over time of a series of theories derived from diverse academic backgrounds, leading to changes in the theoretical focus of the research but without the resolution of prior research questions. Sometimes these theories are championed by a particular author. For example, Kirillova et al. (2017b) focus on the application of existential philosophy. The result is competitive literature, rather than one where this is a consistent theory building endeavour. Currently, the literature consists of individual authors or small groups pursuing their theory rather than seeking domain delimitation and integration.

### **Study's findings**

This study has discussed three important issues about research on the self and transformation in tourism studies. Firstly, the research uncovered and identified some commonality across the literature in terms of processes involved in transformation. Further, it appears that there is some possibility of convergence across theories that (1) a person may have multiple context-dependent selves and that (2) the self is derived or created through external (Bruner, 1991; Fordham, 2006) and/or internal narrative (Laing & Frost, 2017; Ourahmoune, 2016). Secondly, the study's findings have arguably important implications for societal change initiatives. If (most) transformation requires personal motivation, and this is enhanced by an initial mindset for transformation, then achieving mass transformation through tourism experiences may prove a difficult and perhaps infeasible task. The review suggests that at least at some level, a person should have some transformation related to motivation, mindset or existential challenge before they are engaged, as in travel and tourism. The literature on happiness indicates that most people are generally happy (Diener & Diener, 1996), providing a significant challenge to societal transformation through tourism. And thirdly, the study suggests where one can look for a new theory of transformation. Based on the above evidence from the literature, it is suggested that a combination of understanding the cognitive processes of the self – autobiographical memory, emotion, goals, working memory, etc. – combined with an understanding of the social meaning of various activities shows promise in future studies on the topic.

Taking these findings into consideration, future research would be welcome that further examines and discusses (i) these and other underlying cognitive processes, (ii) the potential of effective design approaches and strategies for tourists' personal transformation, namely tourist co-creation as the basis for earlier and deeper understanding of tourist personal motivation and mindset, and (iii) the academic disciplines and the interdisciplinary work that best promise and deliver on conceptualisation, methodological innovation, and explanatory power of tourism transformation-based phenomena based on coherent, integrated theory. Given the rapid development of artificial intelligence, virtual reality (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019), metaverse and related technologies, it would also be useful to examine how these may affect tourism experiences and transformation from them.

### **Study's limitations**

This study consisted of a literature review adopting a methodologically hybrid approach, combining the SLR method and the narrative review, so as to both cover and critically analyse published relevant literature on transformation and tourism in tourism studies. Despite the methodological procedures implemented to ensure inclusiveness and relevance, the breadth of the literature makes it difficult to integrate the diverse theoretical approaches and findings into a cohesive body of knowledge. Therefore, inconsistencies may be found in the discussion above. This review is also a reflection on the 'pure' SLR review process that seeks to clearly define a topic using keywords, one that, in the

authors' view, requires additional contribution from interpretation based on supplementary, expect- edly insightful, literature sources, brought into discussion by authors' decision.

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