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The development and trial of beyond 2050 polylogues as a tool for future-thinking in business tourism

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ABSTRACT

In this methodology research letter, we describe the development, piloting and large-scale trial of an experimental concurrent group discussion approach. Specifically, we detail how we used provocative 2050 scenarios to 'open up' future thinking, facilitate multiple polylogues and efficiently collect large sample qualitative data. The method was trialled with 120 business tourism professionals at the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) conference in Glasgow in 2023. We conclude by reflecting on our learning from the large-scale trial and consider how this method can be developed for other tourism research applications.

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Future thinking; tourism futures; scenario tools; collective emotion; discussion groups

Future-based research

The sustainability of business tourism activities was brought into sharp focus during the Covid-19 pandemic and remains a pertinent topic globally in relation to other threats such as climate change. Proponents of future thinking and scenario-based planning argue that it can better prepare organisations and individuals for future challenges (Peter & Jarratt, 2015). Critics, however, point to disbenefits such as the distraction it can cause to day-to-day business operations (Hines & Gold, 2015). This study explores this nexus, and whilst there is little consensus over approaches to future planning methodology, there are clear benefits in engaging with industry and other stakeholders for the purposes of 'opening up' meaningful discussion about the future to address questions of resilience and sustainability.

The longitudinal FuturE THinking project brings together academics and business tourism professionals to explore snapshots of potential future worlds. Specifically, we explore emotional barriers to future thinking to identify and test techniques which support greater creativity in future planning activities. In contrast to the operational context of future planning research within previous studies, our approach focuses on immersive future scenario development to support creative thinking and discussion.

Consequently, this study contributes collaborative innovation insight into the value of using scenario-based approaches at scale to engage business tourism professionals in meaningful conversations about the future (Bertella et al., 2021; Montouri, 2011). More widely, we also reflect on the value of dianoetic processes in the development of creative explorations of challenging and complex futures.

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Research approach

We began by appraising future-focused research methodologies. This informed our decision to focus on immersive future thinking scenarios in preference to future planning or forecasting approaches (Wassler & Fan, 2021). This direction was followed because we wanted to understand industry stakeholders' reactions and responses to the complex futures rather than elicit discussions about their likelihood.

A review of existing future scenario development methods also highlighted the importance of examining internal and external drivers of change. The year 2050 was then included as a reference point to align the study with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework timeframe for thinking about future global issues.

Scenario development

Scenario development began with the review and categorisation of over 100 academic and grey literature publications relating to world contexts in 2050. Our method used an adapted PESTLE framework (Political, Economic, Societal, Technological Legal and Environmental contexts) to categorise potential drivers of future worlds (for an earlier version of this technique in tourism see Dwyer et al., 2009). The framework was augmented by 'V', representing the terms 'values' and 'value systems' (which we also considered to be important drivers of change). Sub-themes were then identified within each main driver, see Figure 1 for a summary of this process.

Drawing on the drivers, sub-themes and collected literature, four team members then developed three scenarios each, to provide a starting sample. The initial twelve scenarios were then reviewed by the whole team. This determined that they should not require latent knowledge or be based on a specific business tourism context. This was considered important to the success of the large-scale pilot, which would involve participants with varying backgrounds and roles.

The 12 scenarios were then reduced to a final sample of four by removing duplicate themes and areas of overlap between scenarios. The resulting scenarios were presented as heading, subheading, image and a half page descriptor. These are summarised below:

Awesome energy

Clean energy is abundant across the world. Co-operation and sharing of low-carbon technologies have helped to reduce inequality with free, clean energy now available to all.

Immense movement

Complete freedom of movement is possible. Advanced neurotechnology enables interaction with other people and places by thought alone.

Retirement reworked

The retirement model is obsolete with citizens making lifelong societal contributions in different forms. Intergenerational respect and support have deepened.

Ruling robots

Artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed the human workforce and jobs that require creativity, empathy and interaction have increased.

Pilot focus group testing

A pilot focus group lasting 1h40' was then conducted with four event tourism professionals from separate organisations to test the scenarios. Their feedback informed the decision to avoid 'worst case' scenarios as these were felt to introduce a negative bias and constrain open discussion. Piloting also confirmed that whilst all four scenarios stimulated discussion, considering all four was too

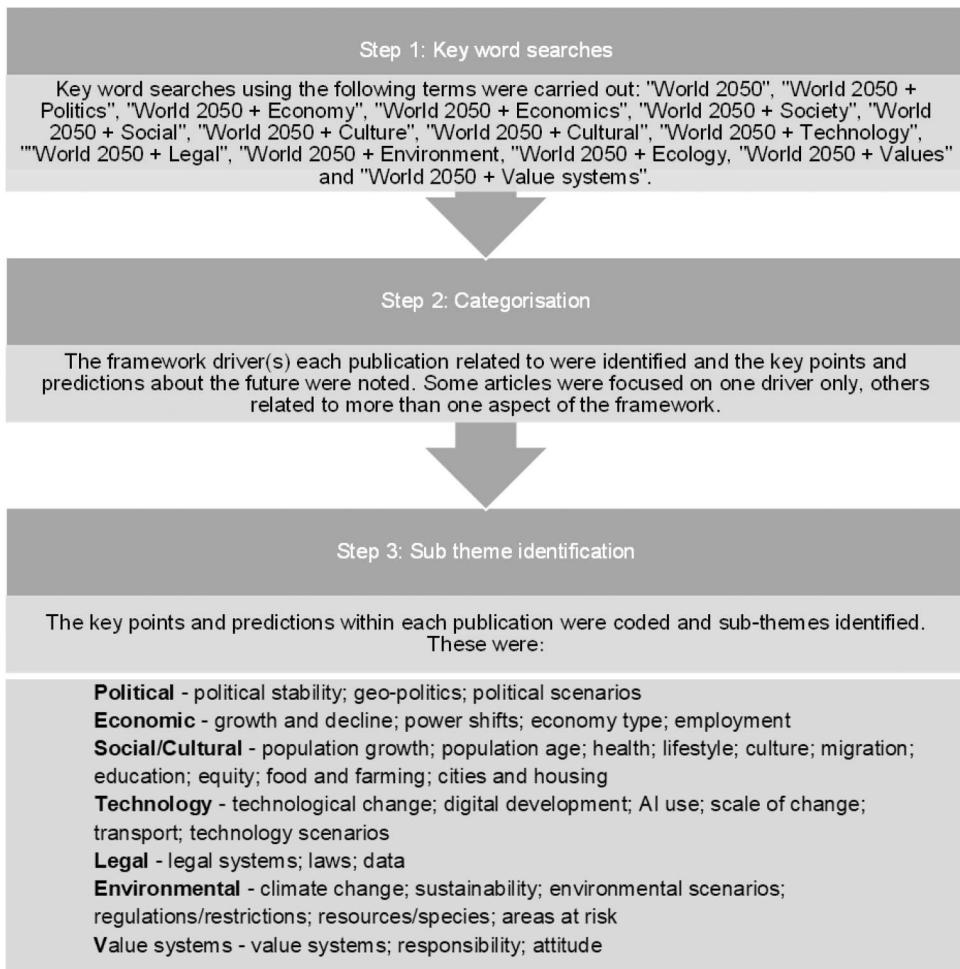


Figure 1. Drivers of change and sub-theme identification.

cognitively demanding. Therefore, it was decided to present one of the four scenarios to each group for the large-scale trial. The group size of four worked well in the pilot allowing all members chance to contribute whilst also allowing for a diversity of views.

We also observed the important influence of emotive perspectives on the pilot discussions. This led us to look towards the creation of *polylogues* involving multiple simultaneous small group discussions (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004; Sardar & Sweeney, 2016).

Large-scale polylogue trial

Our large-scale multiple polylogue trial involved 120 ICCA members who participated in a 50-minute workshop facilitated by an ICCA host and two members of the research team. Ethical approval was obtained from the research team's academic institution and all participants signed an online consent form.

Round tables that seated eight were used with half of each table making up a group of four. Each group of four had an A3 sized copy of one scenario and different coloured sticky notes with the colour linked to each question (see Figure 2). Polylogues were facilitated after the small group



Figure 2. Room and table set-up.

conversations, extending the discussion out to the room and sharing key points from each group of four. The reflective postcards were completed individually after the polylogue facilitation.

Participants were asked not to discuss the scenario likelihood and instead imagine/accept that this is the world they now live in when completing the following tasks:

Task 1. Small group discussion: *'Think about how the scenario makes you feel'* and write comments on sticky notes (3 minutes). Then discuss your notes as a group (10 minutes).

Task 2. Small group discussion: *Consider 'what business tourism will look like in this world?'* and write comments on sticky notes (3 minutes). Then, discuss your notes as a group (10 minutes).

Task 3. Polylogue: Provide group feedback on your scenario discussion to the other groups in the room (10 minutes),

Task 4. Postcards: Reflect individually on the exercise by completing the following reflective postcard questions (10 minutes):

- (1) *What surprised you when thinking about the future?*
- (2) *What surprised you about the responses from others?*
- (3) *What will you remember from this session?*

The postcards were photographed by the participants as session 'takeaways' and then collected by the workshop facilitators (see [Figure 3](#) for example postcard and sticky notes).

Researchers' reflections on the method and resulting data

Whilst facilitating thirty concurrent discussion groups in one large room presented challenges, such as the inability to record the discussions, the approach undoubtedly created a collective effervescence that enhanced the depth and energy of the debate. From the discussions, both pessimism and optimism permeated as key themes, resulting in conversations that pivoted from fear of what might come, to proactive consideration of the opportunities for a better world. This indicates the importance of the group emotional dynamic, as the scenarios flushed out emotions and anxieties about the future which can hinder the process of scenario planning (McCabe et al., 2012; Slaughter, 2012, 2020; Wassler & Fan, 2021).

Furthermore, participants were exposed to multiple 'live' perspectives during the workshop using feedback points to reflect the essence of the discussions to the whole group. For example, whilst one discussion table may have generated a pessimistic view, this was tempered by other perspectives. This ensured there was not one dominant scenario viewpoint, illustrating the 'many futures' rather than 'one future' perspective. This would not have been achieved if each group had been

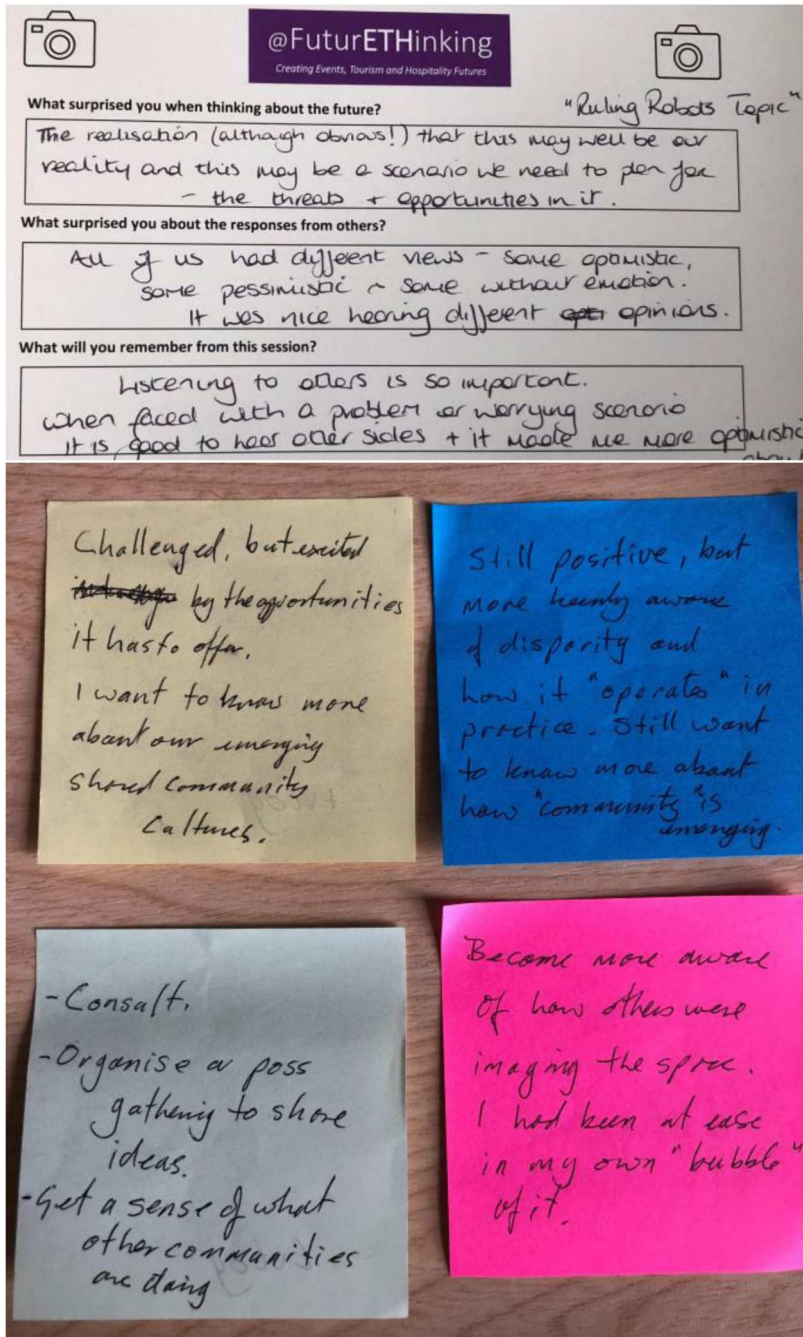


Figure 3. Example postcard and sticky notes.

in separate rooms or involved at separate times. Participant feedback also highlighted that the groups welcomed the opportunity to focus on one scenario but valued hearing collective feedback from groups engaging with the other scenarios. This confirmed our piloting assessment that reviewing multiple scenarios at a time was too cognitively and emotionally demanding.

The high-level of engagement was also reflected in the end of session postcard feedback response rate, where 110 out of the 120 participants (92%) voluntarily completed a reflective postcard. These findings support the use of the multiple polylogue method for this and similar studies, offering a dynamic alternative to focus groups or interviews which traditionally use smaller samples and non-concurrent sessions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

The data generated from the sticky notes, postcards and facilitator reflections provided a richly descriptive narrative encapsulating our participants' feelings and how these changed during the process. For example, participants noted that whilst a scenario may initially provoke a fearful response, *'the more they are discussed the more accepting you can be'*. Similarly, they recognised *'the importance of challenging my own views and looking for the positives'* in the discussion process. The structured nature of the questions enabled an initial deductive thematic analysis but also the openness of debate allowed new areas to emerge. This was viewed positively by participants who felt the discussions often exposed 'a more positive perspective which was encouraging' as well as drawing their attention to creative responses and ones which challenged their own, initial views, which was seen as important.

Participants' reflections on the experience

Individual feedback was obtained a few days after the session via email from 25 participants (20% of the sample) who agreed to follow-up contact. This indicated an overwhelmingly positive response as illustrated by the following extract:

It was brilliant to listen to the insights and complete the sessions at ICCA! I thoroughly enjoyed it, and it certainly encouraged a lot of insightful discussion with colleagues. The scenarios were initially discussed with incredulous reaction, each discussion quickly turned into real world applications in the industry [...] Such a rounded and awakening discussion, with a lot of thought to take away.

The polylogue format was also valued as it exposed participants to multiple collective responses to the scenarios as illustrated by the following quote:

I found this session fascinating as it shone a spotlight on how individuals who, on the face of it, come from a similar professional background but, who interpreted the issues in such differing ways. It was a hugely useful exercise in helping me view things not only from my perspective but to help question and recognise that for most scenarios there can be very different viewpoints. A useful life skill.

Another participant noted:

Listening to others is so important. When faced with a problem or worrying scenario it is good to hear other sides and it made me more optimistic about the scenario.

Through this format, participants became aware of how their own emotional responses affected their future-thinking, and how this can be enriched through interaction and exchange with others. This highlights the potential broader benefits of the exercise for promoting diverse ideas and discussion within the workplace.

Limitations

In our reflections on the method, a few limitations emerge. Firstly, the format posed challenges for recording the discussions, this meant that we were reliant on the sticky notes and postcards to capture the key points. However, this also helped in terms of the processing of data and in getting the participants to determine the most important points in their discussions. Secondly, the size of sticky notes limited the participants' reflections, and we would recommend moving to A5 note paper. This would allow for greater reflection whilst still limiting the amount written to focus the mind and leave adequate time for discussion.

Future research directions

Method

The multiple polylogue method can also be developed further. Interesting development activities would include trials of longer workshops and/or multiple workshops with the same participants. This latter aspect would introduce longitudinal reflective elements to the method. Further research is also needed on the optimum make-up of the polylogue participants, for example, bringing in others from outside the industry or involving customers.

Context

Based on the successful development and trial of the polylogue discussion group method we recommend using similar methods for other tourism and related sectors (e.g. airlines or events), or one PESTLEV realm, (e.g. technology). Furthermore, there is scope for applying the technique to a particular tourism activity, destination, or mode of transport. From a demographic perspective, we also recommend research that engages young, future industry professionals as well as a mix of consumer age groups. Our own project is exploring scenario research with tourism and events students as future leaders within the sector. Future research should also involve stakeholders in different geographical, cultural, and political contexts to examine global perspectives on future strategic thinking across the tourism sector.

Theory

Here we are applying the method to better understand the role that emotions play in encouraging, or limiting, creative thinking about the future. Further research might apply this technique to other theoretical areas such as collective emotions, group dynamics, resilience or strategy development.

In summary, the use of provocative far future scenarios as stimuli that inspire polylogues amongst stakeholders has the potential to help the tourism industry think more creatively about the future. This approach also has great potential to be used in other sectors, to be expanded into an effective management development tool and, to be used as a large-scale qualitative data gathering technique.

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