

MEASURING TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCES IN TOURISM

What makes a tourist's experience transformational? It's an important question given the growth of the types of tourism that seek to secure meaningful experiences. For decades, researchers have offered different definitions to guide practitioners. Drs. Asli Tasci and Maksim Godovykh of the UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management have gone a step further and developed an empirical model for measuring whether experiences are transformational. The research has produced more than a few surprises.

By its very definition, tourism requires something of an extraordinary experience—an element of travel away from home for recreation, relaxation, pleasure, or novel exploits for the purposes of learning. However, some tourist experiences may be more 'extraordinary' than others; the term 'transformational' comes to mind. It's an intoxicating term and especially *en vogue* in marketing destinations within specific growing forms of tourism, such as sustainable, eco- and volunteer tourism. However, 'transformation' in tourism is not a new concept—it has been in academic rhetoric for about twenty years. With a shifting focus towards the wellness of individuals and society in tourism, researchers have struggled to define the term 'transformational tourism experience.' Undaunted, two researchers have gone one step further and measured it. Developing such a quantitative scale of transformation is not only a significant advance in transformational theory but also has significant value for practitioners with an eye on providing something more than an extraordinary tourism experience.

At the UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management, Dr. Asli Tasci and Dr. Maksim Godovykh are particularly interested in tourism in multicultural settings and its impact on those settings. As such, they are drawn to the broad concept of transformational experiences in tourism that can profoundly

affect individuals and the communities they visit. The Rosen researchers are well acquainted with the diversity of qualitative opinion about transformational experiences within academic literature, on its definition and what triggers it, and therefore the challenges of providing an authoritative quantitative method of evaluating it. Nevertheless, they embarked on a three-part study that generated significant data and provided a seismic shift in our understanding of what makes a tourism experience truly 'transformational.'

THE CHALLENGE OF QUANTIFICATION

Before this Rosen study, it was not fully understood what makes tourism a 'transformational' experience. The term conjures up ideas of wellbeing, happiness, and deep personal reflection leading to a significant change in outlook—imagine a young backpacker from Brooklyn spending two weeks in an ashram in India. But the term is far broader than that. It invokes considerations of personal enrichment; physical, psychological, and spiritual transformations; changes in identity and character; critical awareness of self and condition; and enrichment that is more desirable and of more lasting value than the experience itself. Importantly, because tourism requires a physical departure from the customary, and exposure to novel surroundings, it is well-qualified to trigger

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significant experiences. The challenge has always been to quantify those experiences.

The Rosen researchers knew that the first step to measuring transformation was a qualitative study of its definition. To do this, they turned to current literature and performed a comprehensive and critical review; uncovering not only the various meanings of transformation but also what it comprised, its dimensions, and what triggers it. They also interviewed experienced travelers to get their interpretations. A vital clarification for quantifying transformation emerged: experiences didn't need to be positive to be considered transformational, although the essence of self-change elicited by the experience was invariably positive.

While there was diversity in what the researchers uncovered, concepts around

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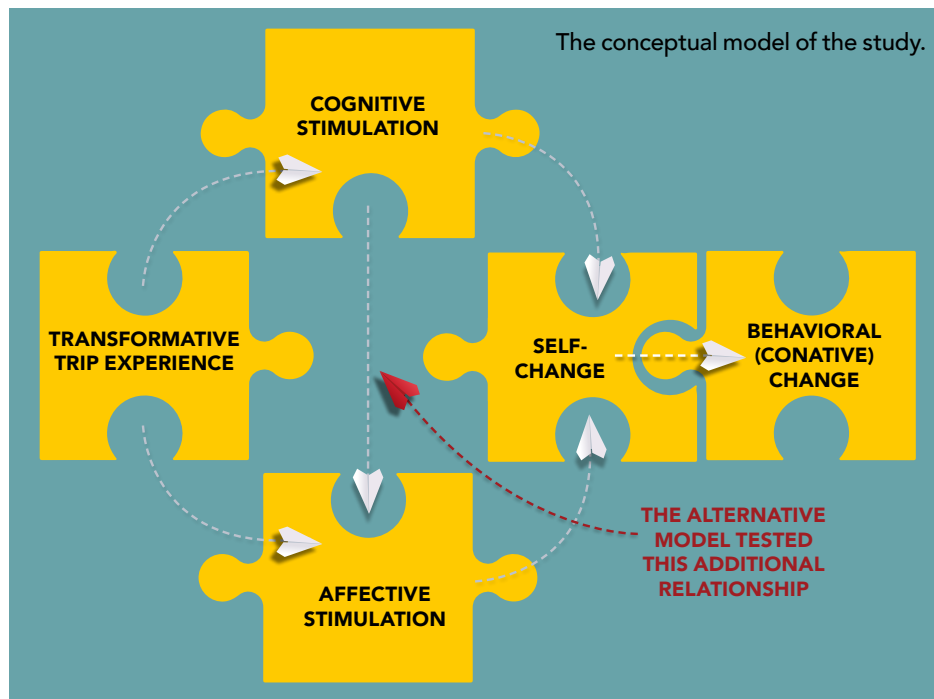
transformation broadly fitted a tri-component model that divides consumer attitudes into three components: cognitive, affective (or emotional), and conative (or behavioral). From this, the researchers collated what they considered to be a comprehensive definition of transformation: 'a process of change 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 behavioral intentions about self and the environment.' They also arrived at a list of 101 unique terms relevant to transformational trip experiences, cognitive and affective stimulations, and self-change and behavioral change. The next step was to quantify and validate their concept.

THE DIMENSIONS OF TRANSFORMATION

Using an online survey of 328 experienced travelers based in the U.S. and employing principal component analysis to summarize information from the data, the Rosen researchers reduced the list to 70 key items of the most meaningful through the lenses of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral stimulation. The results showed that the transformational trip experiences could indeed be either positive—such as uniting with nature or engaging in self-improvement activities—or negative—such as facing personal problems or witnessing tragedies (for example visiting a Holocaust museum). The cognitive components of the experiences were broadly affirming—such as sensations of freedom,

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confidence, and inspiration—or challenging—usually associated with confusion, uncertainty, or disorientation. Cognitive stimulation elements also included an opening to others, such as compassion and sympathy.

In terms of emotional stimulation within the respondents, the researchers identified two broad dimensions: euphoria (such as happiness, joy and love) and distress (such as guilt, anger and fear). There were four dimensions to self-change, which they called propelled inner power, personality change, change in outlook on life, and change in outlook on others. Finally, the study identified three dimensions to behavioral change: those conducive to happiness; those associated with a regression to basics, such as retiring and socializing less; and those related to gregarious tendencies, such as socializing more and trying new hobbies.

From their study, the Rosen researchers not only had a clearer picture of transformational experiences in tourism and how to break them down into various categories but also how they could be ranked. Using another survey, they conducted a third study with 552 respondents—again, all people based in the U.S. who had traveled before—asking how they ranked each dimension variable within a transformative experience. By employing partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), the researchers could

examine the relationships across multiple variables, such as what positive events were broadly affirming (cognitive) and led to increased gregarious tendencies. In essence, they had a detailed data set that showed a bigger picture of transformational experiences, and it came with a few surprises.

A FEW SURPRISES

Among the more interesting insights is that transformational experiences are not necessarily more likely among first-time

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travelers who are a little overwhelmed by their circumstances. In fact, a significant number of their respondents were seasoned travelers, suggesting the cumulative impact of repeated traveling culminating in a transformational experience. There is not necessarily a single momentous event. Another thing that the research team learned that came as something of a surprise is that an experience doesn't necessarily need to be foreign or exotic to be transformational—domestic trips within the U.S. can also deliver transformational

experiences. Also, not everyone expects to be—or wants to be—'transformed' when they go on holiday.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to preconceptions the tourism industry may have about such experiences is that they are not destination or purpose-specific—people don't need to go to a particular place with the objective of self-improvement or spiritual transformation to have a transformational experience; it can happen anywhere, at any time.

This doesn't necessarily mean that destination-marketing-organizations hoping to offer transformational tourism experiences should throw their arms up in despair. This Rosen research has produced a wealth of information that can help guide organizations toward designing experiences known to trigger the most significant cognitive, emotional, and behavioral shifts in people. That doesn't have to be alone at the top of a mountain; it could be in a thronging nightclub or a rural village reaching out to help someone in need. Knowing that such experiences aren't limited to specific destinations or conditions should be seen as an opportunity. Transformational experiences are among the most memorable for tourists, and an industry that strives to create memorable experiences should put more effort into how to make them transformational.

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study aimed to develop a scale of transformation that can be used in future studies to advance transformation theory and as a managerial tool for practitioners.

REFERENCES

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

Your research has opened up our understanding of transformative experiences in tourism; how would you like to see other researchers contribute to it?

Transformation is a long-term process that might lead to positive changes in people's feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and behavior. Therefore, we hope that other researchers will be able to conduct longitudinal studies to help us understand the future dynamics of tourists' transformation over time after transformative travel experiences.



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