

## Customizing deeper transformational tourism experiences for vulnerable tourists

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## Abstract

Transformational tourism experiences can lead to acquiring life-changing knowledge, practices or beliefs. However, tourism scholars and suppliers have not fully exploited the concepts and opportunities that deeper transformational tourism brings to support mentally vulnerable tourists (with mental health conditions) since most studies focus on tourist experiences of typical travellers; there exists a knowledge gap on tourism service suppliers' adequacy and preparedness to facilitate the provision and design of deeper transformational experiences. This article contributes to existing studies on transformational tourism and transformative experience design by shifting focus to a specialized community of unconventional travel suppliers as key contributors for deeper transformational travel experiences. It also considers the relationship of key stakeholders necessary for effective intervention in forming deeper transformational experiences. The latter calls for further studies to operationalize a conceptual framework and future study to assess the outcome of the transformation post-trip. This study also supports the need for collaboration beyond travel service suppliers to facilitate transformational tourism services.

**Keywords:** service suppliers, deeper transformational tourism, experience economy, transformative service research, vulnerable participants, duty of care

## Introduction

Transformational travel is any travel experience that empowers people to make meaningful, lasting changes in their life. Ultimately, it is a new philosophy on travel that connects travellers to their truest self and to others, cultivating a sense of purpose and belonging.

(Hauptert)

The quote by Hauptert (Transformational Travel Council 2018) suggests the lasting and life-changing impact of transformational tourism. Although not a new phenomenon ([Fu et al. 2015](#); [Reisinger 2013](#); [Robledo and Batle 2017](#)), transformational tourism has received increasing attention in recent years, especially since 2020 ([Ateljevic 2020](#); [Bueddefeld and Duerden 2022](#); [Chhabra 2022](#); [Galeone and Sebastiani 2021](#); [Magrizos et al. 2021](#); [Melo et al. 2021](#); [Pung and Chiappa 2020](#); [Sheldon 2020](#)). To date, studies on transformational tourism have focused on the tourists ([Reisinger 2013](#); [Yang et Al. 2015](#); [Laing and Frost 2017](#); [Robledo and Batle 2017](#)), but very few studies are focused on the tourism service suppliers ([Melo et al. 2021](#); [Nandasena et al. 2022](#)). Moreover, a comprehensive framework to guide service researchers is lacking ([Dodds et al. 2022](#)).

Transformational tourism has been associated with other special interest tourism, such as wellness ([Lean 2009](#); [Voigt et al. 2011](#)), spas ([Hall et al. 2011](#)), cosmetic surgery ([Ackerman 2010](#)), hope ([Pritchard et al. 2011](#)), yoga ([Dillette et al. 2019](#)), adventure ([Bennett 2012](#)), luxury ([Gretzel et al. 2006](#)) experiences, and other types of experiences ranging from religious pilgrimages to backpacking and ecotourism ([Nandasena et al. 2022](#)). However, this article emphasizes the critical importance of tourism service suppliers' awareness of their duty of care in designing travel experiences, as it directly impacts the quality and effectiveness of deeper transformative experiences for travellers.

The new generation of travellers are seeking to go beyond the hedonistic experiences a holiday could provide ([Cavagnaro et al. 2018](#); [Costa Rica Tourism Board 2018](#)) in place of the opportunities for self-development and inner transformation ([Melo et al. 2021](#)). While it is well known that generally travel allows visitors to be filled with the experience of happiness and

goodness ([Cao 2015](#)), it is not the same as what one experiences when on a transformational travel journey. A transformational experience can create an emotional, cognitive and existential dissonance ([Scoffham and Barnes 2009](#)). This dissonance arises when individuals are exposed to situations or perspectives that differ significantly from their usual way of thinking or living. The tension resulting from dissonance, though uncomfortable, has the potential to foster personal growth and development. According to [Scoffham and Barnes \(2009\)](#), these experiences are likely to occur when people venture beyond their comfort zones, leading to a profound change process culminating in a fundamental shift in one's sense of self and way of being-in-the-world ([Grindler Katonah et al. 2018](#)). However, we argue that such a liminal environment provides a temporal reversal of our lives ([Kirillova et al. 2017a](#)) and does not bring about sustained transformational or deeper transformational changes.

Since the expected outcome of transformational tourism is life-changing, it appears to be more demanding than other types of tourism – and perhaps, as [Pung and Chiappa \(2020\)](#) assert, more than what tourism was made to be. [Sheldon \(2020\)](#) highlights the complexity of crafting transformative travel experiences, underscoring the need for suppliers to deeply understand tourists' values, motivations and consciousness levels. This understanding should extend to the awareness levels of both tourism providers and decision-makers. [Soulard et al. \(2019\)](#) further emphasize the critical role of employees in curating personalized transformative experiences for tourists while providing a strategic framework for organizations and firms seeking to deliver such experiences effectively. Therefore, it is critical for tourism service suppliers to recognize beyond their regular service the duty of care in designing deeper transformational travel experiences. In the healthcare system, scholars have examined the need for service experience design to enhance the well-being of participants other than patients, to include their families and carers ([Anderson et al. 2018](#)), who are important for their aftercare. In the context of transformational tourism, more stakeholders and specialists outside the conventional tourism structure should also be considered in transformational experience design.

The article was initially inspired by one of our researcher's friends whose transformational travel journey did not end well. The subject's travel journey was regarded as a therapy, but it did not accomplish what was expected of it psychologically – in other words, the transformation did not last, and the therapy was unsuccessful. Around the same period, Levi et al. (2019) published a research note on tourism and depressive symptoms, calling attention to the vulnerable tourists, specifically those with major depressive disorder, further prompting this project team to continue our research on vulnerable tourists compromised by their mental disabilities. Their study highlighted the intricate nature of employing tourism as a therapeutic approach for depression, stressing the necessity of individualized and well-structured travel experiences to fully harness its potential benefits. For atypical travellers – a small and isolated group – the post-trip experience is just as important as the pre-trip experience and should be monitored to gauge the outcomes of deeper transformational travel experiences.

In this article, practitioners and scholars would find beneficial discussions and analysis that would help them reflect on ways to engage in and deliver deeper transformational tourism experiences and research. A conceptual framework for transformative service design is developed to invite further dialogues among experience, tourism and psychology scholars for future study.

## Literature review

The literature review is separated into three sections focusing on dominant theories and concepts of transformational tourism, transformative service research (TSR) and risks involving transformational experience, particularly since this article touches on vulnerable tourists.

### *Transformation theories and tourism*

The two dominant theories frequently employed in transformational tourism research are Campbell's (1949) hero's journey and Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy. By examining these theories, we aim to identify gaps in the existing literature on TSR.

## *The hero's journey*

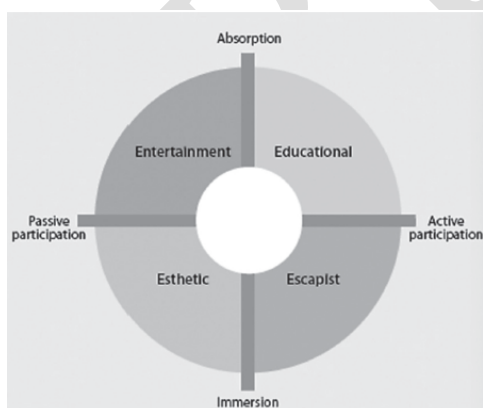
Campbell's concept of the hero's journey, outlined in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), provides a framework for understanding how travel experiences mirror the process of personal transformation. Travel narratives often mirror the hero's journey comprising, departure, initiation and return, representing an adventure of discovery and a new way of being. [Robledo and Batle \(2017\)](#) provide a comprehensive breakdown of the phenomenon at varying stages using a phenomenological approach, drawing on the metaphor of the hero's journey using eight factors: personal situation, being away doing unfamiliar activities, interaction with people, living the moment, difficulty, setting reflection and integration. According to [Sheldon \(2020\)](#), a shift in human consciousness is attained at the peak of transformation in scenarios involving deep human connectivity, deep environmental connectivity, self-inquiry, engaged contribution or the combination of these scenarios. However, it is observed that these deep connections reside within liminal spaces that [Neuhofer et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Sheldon \(2020\)](#) ascribed to the present transformative power of tourism experiences that may not necessarily equate to the deeper transformation needed to affect the transformational healing power that vulnerable tourists are seeking.

The hero's traits have been used to analyse characters in volunteer tourism ([Tomazos and Butler 2010](#)), as well as leaders in the hospitality and tourism industry ([Goh and Yeoman 2021](#)), to examine the transformation. [Moin et al. \(2020\)](#) artfully examine the features under three stages of the hero's journey as a marketing tool to generate stories and experiences of tourism destinations for prospective visitors. In [Levi et al. \(2019\)](#), the authors operationalized the hero's journey by studying the pre-trip and post-trip experience of participants with depression symptoms. Levi et al. concluded that a 'customised environment' (2019: 193) may be purposively planned with the aim of improving travellers' mental well-being. This article questioned if the iteration of the three stages would promote a deeper transformational experience until a sustained transformation and even healing is attained.

## *The experience economy*

Experience is and is still regarded as a megatrend ([Mehmetoglu and Engen 2011](#)) today. Beyond products, consumers seem to value experiences that are unique, meaningful and immersive as part of their consumption. According to [Pine and Gilmore \(1999\)](#), consumers yearn to be co-creators of experiences. The experience economy presents a framework for understanding the progression of economic value from commodities to transformations ([Pine and Gilmore 2011](#)). Pine and Gilmore's four realms of experience provide a theoretical framework for categorizing experiences by considering customers' participation and their connection with the environment or surroundings. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the two dimensions of experience: participation and connection. On one end of the participation spectrum lies passive engagement, where the customer does not actively influence the experience. At the other end is active participation, where the customer plays a key role in shaping the experience. The second dimension, connection, ranges from absorption, where the customer maintains a distance, to immersion, where the customer is fully engaged. The four realms of experience – entertainment, aesthetic, educational and escapist – are situated within this two-dimensional framework.

*Figure 1: The four experience realms ([Pine and Gilmore 1998](#)).*



‘Experiences are not the final economic offering’ ([Pine and Gilmore 2011: 244](#)). Pine and Gilmore theorized that experience must be customized for the individual before it is automatically translated into transformation. According to the authors, transformation is what the out-of-shape person, the emotionally troubled person, the young managers, the hospital patient and the struggling company all really desire.

[Kirillova et al. \(2017\)](#) urged tourism researchers to shift their attention from a purely behavioural approach to refocusing the role of the supplier as the co-creator of transformative experiences, rather than merely staging them – a step up to what these authors have described as the ‘third-generation experience economy (3.0)’. The first-generation experience economy (1.0) focused on the supplier as the cast for staged experiences ([Pine and Gilmore 1998](#)), while the second-generation economy (2.0) considered the co-creation of experiences in concert with the consumers ([Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004](#); [Tussyadiah 2014](#)). [Kirillova et al. \(2017\)](#) argued that the new, third-generation goal of tourism should not be confined to promoting meaningful personal changes but should extend to promoting changes that last – this is in line with the aim of this study to design sustained and deeper transformational tourism experiences. According to Pine and Gilmore (2019), a customer is not part of a market and should therefore be considered as a unique individual. Mass customization is possible and could run concurrently once the individual customer within its category is recognized – the entire economy revolves around this individual to customize what they are willing to pay.

Figure 2: Completing the progression of economic value ([Pine and Gilmore 2011: 245](#)).

Diagram showing the progression of economic value from commodities to transformations.

Transformations sit at the top as the most customized and differentiated offering;

commodities sit at the bottom as the most commoditized. Customization drives upward

movement through goods, services and experiences, while commoditization moves in reverse

from transformations back to commodities.

[Robledo and Batle \(2017\)](#) urged researchers to provide in-depth studies of the transformational potential of various tourism products and services. It is also important to note

the difference between unintentional experiences and intentionally designed ones (Neuhofer 2024). Extant studies suggest that, to be effective, transformative services should be authentic ([Voigt et al. 2011](#)) and involve the deliberate and active participation of guests ([Yang et al. 2015](#)) in customized programmes ([Clausing 2018](#)) devised by trained specialists ([Chaves et al. 2019](#)). The latter mention of having trained specialists deserves further examination, especially for the vulnerable participants.

Personal transformation is not completed within a single experience. There are different episodes or stages ([Gelter 2010](#)) that combine to create the transformation, suggesting different transformation trajectories and iterations of a transformation cycle. According to [Gelter \(2010\)](#), transformation is a process made up of several designed experiences – each with clear learning outcomes. Transformational experiences must be planned with clear objectives and institutional support to attain consumer satisfaction. The scholars in TSR also suggest that business organizations should be strategic and proactive in involving partners and consumers in the process of transformation ([Galeone and Sebastiani 2017](#); [Anderson and Ostrom 2015](#)). Further, strategies need to be adapted culturally to achieve success ([Smith 2014](#)).

### *Transformative service research and stakeholders*

Researchers and practitioners involved in these [transformational tourism] services may easily begin considering well-being outcomes as relevant managerial goals, although the organizations might not always be successful in achieving them and may be unintentionally engaging in activities that reduce consumer well-being.

([Rosenbaum et al. 2011](#): 3)

How explicit and effective transformational services in the tourism sector are remains under-researched. This is partly explained by scholars thus far spending more time in researching consumer satisfaction, future behavioural patterns and generating positive word-of-mouth, instead of balancing the focus on other critical areas such as service design and how service providers can improve consumers' welfare and well-being ([Anderson et al. 2013](#); [Mick 2006](#); [Rosenbaum et al. 2011](#); [Rosenbaum 2015](#)).

At its core, TSR emphasizes concern for the well-being of both consumers and

employees, recognizing that this concern may not always align equally for all individuals. Research has shown that a holistic service consciousness, along with positive service staff attitudes, can translate into the positive well-being of customers ([Rosenbaum et al. 2011](#)). However, this does not imply that employees' needs are equivalent to those of customers; rather, it underscores the pivotal role of service staff in facilitating positive transformational experience design. TSR has ventured into the research domain of vulnerable tourists with marginalized and stigmatized conditions, which is usually overlooked by tourism service suppliers ([Rosenbaum 2015](#)). It remains unclear what level of transformative services travel suppliers are currently providing – and whether trained staff are available at hand to ensure a more positive experience for vulnerable tourists. According to [Galeone and Sebastiani \(2017\)](#), most services have transformational potential, but are they equipped to serve the vulnerable consumers? Neuhofer (2024) asserts that researchers should build on research of recency ([Celuch and Neuhofer 2024](#); [Kuokkanen and Kirillova 2024](#); [Soulard and Lundin 2023](#)) to examine the tourism stakeholders, including guides and facilitators, that are required to create positive tourism experiences. Refer also to Neuhofer's (2024) visual conceptualization of positive tourism experiences for human transformation. The key stakeholders for positive interventions are facilitators (design and measure), trainers (for guiding), designers (digital) and the community (facilitate and guide).

When compared to the explicit agenda of healthcare and education segments, the retail, hospitality and entertainment sectors do not present clear transformative goals ([Galeone and Sebastiani 2021](#)). Further, different types of transformational experiences appeal to different types of tourists. For example, in [Magee and Gilmore \(2015\)](#), tourists derived transformation by engaging in experiences of the past at heritage sites through dark tourism, while in [Dillette et al. \(2019\)](#), yoga tourists sought holistic transformational experiences through yoga-related activity in an ideal retreat environment with natural surroundings. Dillette et al. urged businesses to evaluate the transformational experiences of their guests after their stay at the retreat to enable the incorporation of transformative messages in marketing collaterals and in

the development of further transformative experiences to offer to potential repeat customers.

Anderson and Anderson noted that ‘transformation is the radical shift from one state of being to another, so significant that it requires a shift of culture, behaviour and mind set’ (2010: 39). Reisinger (2013) argued that transformation goes beyond the concept of experiences and was interested in how to fulfil tourists seeking transformation. She asserted that tourists could shape new attitudes and perceptions of the world for themselves and, consequently, change their actions; her focus was on the traveller’s experience.

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Transformational travel is a personal endeavour that requires setting a clear purpose at the beginning of one's journey. According to [Ross \(2010\)](#), transformation must be purposefully included in the traveller's agenda if it is to be achieved. The purpose is deeper than that of regular tourists seeking sun, sea and sand ([Morgan 2010](#)). [Yang et al. \(2015\)](#) further examined the effects of tourists' need for healing experiences on their purpose or behavioural intention for transformation. Their need for healing led to the proactive involvement of the transformative tourists, known as 'healing involvement'. [Yang et al. \(2015\)](#) urged tourism suppliers to focus their messaging when marketing and promoting their tourism products and services. This is important to practitioners as the word transformation seems a huge undertaking if healing or the process of healing is expected. In a recent paper, [Wu et al. \(2024\)](#) provides a framework for understanding how hospitality and tourism experiences support mental health via the Harbor, Evolve, Awaken, Link (HEAL) Model. Since tourism can serve as a therapeutic escape, providing emotional relief from daily stressors and psychological distress ([Chen et al. 2016](#)), we wonder if it can be considered a way to support deeper forms of transformation for the vulnerable tourists as well.

Given a more complex group of tourists with special mental health needs, suppliers in the hospitality sector would be expected to step up in their role as accommodation providers. In a Skift survey ([Gustafson 2018](#)), 'accommodation' is the lowest ranked factor – after 'none of the above' – among seven external factors leading to transformational moments. The other five factors were 'people on the trip'; 'spontaneous unexpected adventure'; 'food, art, culture or entertainment'; 'spiritual or wellness activity' and 'business event or conference'. 'People on the trip' topped the list of factors in the survey. It is thus not surprising that [Cohan \(2018\)](#) reported the challenges facing new hotels and resorts are beyond the regular service of providing accommodation, as the additional wellness programming and cultural sampling activities now required have resulted in the need for a more complex and sophisticated space.

Just as experiential resorts cannot be built overnight, they are not easily duplicated or integrated by the traditional ‘heads on beds’ hotels (Cohan 2018: 4). An earlier study by [Kucukusta and Heung \(2012\)](#) on the problems of developing wellness tourism in China provides insights into suppliers. The findings attributed the problems to a lack of trained staff, limited collaboration, and poor facilities and attractions. Government support, promotional programmes and staff training were proposed as measures to overcome the difficulties. An exploratory study by [Sabharwal et al. \(2021\)](#) examined readiness in travel operators to offer transformational travel experiences. Outcomes revealed that only a small percentage of the study participants had some understanding of what transformational tourism was, highlighting a need to explicitly operationalize the expectations of transformational services for successful offering of transformational travel services.

### *Risks in designing transformational experiences*

Risk is not often dealt with in transformational research. However, when dealing with vulnerable tourists, it is important to consider the implications of transformational experience design. Risk may not be perceived as a negative item in transformational research but an unfulfilled need awaiting to be attended. [McLain \(2023\)](#) in his book on *Designing Transformative Experiences*, identifies risks as the ‘key ingredient’ that scholars have neglected. Experienced designers need to understand their customers’ risks. The author describes the provision of risky experience as entering the experienter’s ‘personal discomfort zone’ (McLain 2023: 96). According to McLain, our perceptions of risks describe these discomfort zones. He classified risks into physical risks, emotional risks, intellectual risks and social risks (2023: 97). Further, he analyses risk from the customer’s perspective and the business’s perspective, arguing that awareness of these risks and how one makes decisions across different types of risks is necessary for experience designers and, in this case, tourism service suppliers, to tailor their risk invitations to their customer’s discomfort zone experiences.

## Conceptualizing the dream team for designing transformational tourism experience

The conceptual framework we develop uses vulnerable tourists with depression as the context to design the ideal relationship between key stakeholders in a transformational tourism system (see [Figure 3](#)). For the vulnerable tourist, the mental health support specialists are currently lacking in existing review. Drawing from contemporary psychology, trained specialists should be therapists with a sound knowledge of psychotherapy, positive interventions and psychopathology, according to [Chaves et al. \(2019\)](#), as well as trained volunteers. This framework assumes intentionally designed transformative experiences as opposed to the unintentional ones. Not all tourism service suppliers are as well informed about designing transformative tourism experiences ([Sabharwal et al. 2021](#)), therefore, it is essential for existing suppliers to work with The Transformational Travel Council, which has experts trained in delivering transformative experiences. The council is an independent institution set up to inspire and educate transformative coaches, independent travellers and destinations in designing and delivering transformative experiences ([Kaefer 2022](#)). The framework shows the access between the tourism service suppliers, The Transformational Travel Council and the option for the vulnerable tourist to also access the council directly without going through the suppliers.

As [Gelter \(2010\)](#) asserts, there are multiple stages before transformation happens. The pre-trip and post-trip timeline is added to the proposed framework as per the hero's journey to remind researchers that it is important to record and assess the transformation pre-trip and post-trip just as [Levi et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Kuokkanen and Kirillova \(2024\)](#) proposed. Although, according to [Kuokkanen and Kirillova](#), a 'peak' (2024: 4) tourism experience can become transformative during the course of travelling, we argue that it is also important to consider the 'low' post-trip. Researchers should consider the ethics of transformative experiences in

Kuokkanen and Kirillova's work, as well as study the post-trip transformation experience design as part of the process of transformation.

Extant studies advocate that for transformative services to be effective, the design should be authentic ([Voigt et al. 2011](#)), with the proactive involvement of guests ([Yang et al. 2015](#)). In this context, the host community is included in the framework to enhance the authenticity of the experience on top of the guests. This would mean the intentional education and training of the host community in delivering transformative experiences besides the mental health specialists.

It takes the conscious and responsible effort of the tourism service suppliers to engage the key stakeholders outside their circle to produce transformational tourism experiences. Researchers should also examine the organizational behaviour and leadership patterns of tourism service suppliers in future studies, as experiences should be designed with clear objectives and institutional support to cater to customers.

Figure 3: Conceptual framework of transformational tourism design stakeholders.

Framework of transformational tourism design stakeholder pre-trip and post-trip. Post-trip include support with follow-up by the collective of stakeholders in the diagram.

## Operationalizing the conceptual framework

This section outlines how the proposed conceptual framework can be translated into measurable variables and research design. [Table 1](#) shows how the proposed conceptual framework of transformational tourism design for stakeholders (see [Figure 3](#)) can be translated into an empirical research model. To operationalize this framework, key constructs – such as the role of tourism service suppliers, The Transformational Travel Council, mental health support specialists and the vulnerable tourist experience – have been defined in measurable terms. The methods section details the data collection approach, including participant selection criteria (e.g. vulnerable tourists with depression), instruments used to measure psychological

and experiential outcomes, and the procedures for assessing stakeholder contributions at different stages of the travel process (pre-trip, during travel and post-trip). Additionally, this table also suggests the analytical techniques employed to examine the relationships among the identified stakeholders and assess the impact of transformational tourism on mental well-being with the aim to bridge theoretical constructs with practical, observable metrics, ensuring the model's applicability in both research and industry settings.

Potential projects utilizing this framework could explore research questions on how transformational tourism contributes to improved mental health outcomes for vulnerable tourists. Alternatively, studies could focus on identifying and analysing the roles of key stakeholders involved in the process. Another avenue for research could be assessing the effectiveness of post-trip mental health support in sustaining well-being, providing insights into long-term impacts and best practices for continued care.

Table 1: Operationalizing the proposed conceptual framework for transformational tourism design for stakeholders.

**Table outlining the operationalization of a proposed conceptual framework for transformational tourism design for stakeholders. It illustrates key stages, including design elements, relevant variables, participant roles, data collection methodologies and approaches to data analysis.**

Design	Variables	Participants	Data collection	Data analysis
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<p><i>Mixed-methods approach:</i> incorporating both quantitative (e.g. surveys, psychological scales) and qualitative (e.g. interviews, focus groups) methods.</p> <p><i>Longitudinal design:</i> may be used to assess pre-trip, post-trip and follow-up outcomes.</p> <p><i>Experimental or observational study:</i> depending on feasibility, an intervention-based study could evaluate the impact of transformational tourism on mental health.</p>	<p><i>Independent variables (IVs):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tourism service suppliers</i> (e.g. type, quality and accessibility measured using Likert scale survey on accessibility, guidance and personalization).</li> <li>• <i>The Transformational Travel Council support</i> (e.g. presence of coaching/guidance, structured reflection exercises).</li> <li>• <i>Host community engagement</i> (e.g. cultural immersion activities, social interaction).</li> </ul> <p><i>Dependent variables (DVs):</i></p>	<p><i>Participants:</i> vulnerable tourists (diagnosed with depression, self-reported mental health challenges).</p>	<p><i>Pre-trip:</i> baseline surveys assessing mental health status, resilience and expectations.</p> <p><i>During the trip:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• journaling</li> <li>• daily reflections</li> <li>• observational notes.</li> </ul> <p><i>Post-trip (follow-up at one, three, six months):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• surveys</li> <li>• structured interviews</li> <li>• focus groups.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Quantitative:</i> descriptive and inferential statistics to assess changes in depression and well-being.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>t</i>-tests</li> <li>• ANOVA</li> <li>• Regression models.</li> </ul> <p><i>Qualitative:</i> thematic analysis of qualitative feedback or for participant interviews that explore the depth of transformational experiences and their impact on personal well-being.</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tourist well-being</i></li> </ul> <p>PHQ-9</p> <p>DASS-21</p> <p>Zung SDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Emotional resilience</i></li> </ul> <p>BRS</p> <p>RS-10.</p> <p><i>Long-term mental health improvement:</i></p> <p>WHO-5</p> <p>RAS</p> <p>WEMWBS</p> <p>MHC-SF.</p> <p><i>Moderating/mediating variables:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>pre-trip mental health status</i></li> <li>• <i>level of engagement</i></li> </ul> <p>transformational travel programmes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>post-trip mental health support access or post-trip mental health</i></li> </ul>			
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	<p><i>support</i></p> <p><i>engagement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• follow-up therapy</li> <li>• continued</li> </ul> <p>mindfulness practices.</p>			
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*Note:* Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9); Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21); Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS); Brief Resilience Scale (BRS); 10-item Resilience Scale (RS-10); WHO Well-Being Index (WHO-5); Recovery Assessment Scale (RAS); Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS); Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF).

By integrating psychological assessments, participant experiences and stakeholder contributions, our article systematically operationalizes the conceptual framework into a structured research design.

The inclusion of mental health professionals in tourism design is an innovative yet complex proposition. While research highlights the psychological benefits of structured support in travel experiences ([Pung and Chiappa 2020](#)), practical challenges such as cost, training and stakeholder buy-in must be addressed.

A feasible approach is to implement tiered service models ([Hood 2015](#)) where travellers can opt for mental health support, such as pre-trip counselling or guided reflection sessions. Additionally, digital interventions, such as virtual counselling or AI-driven wellness tools, offer scalable, cost-effective alternatives ([Espejo et al. 2023](#)). Rather than full integration, a capacity-building approach may be more practical, where tourism professionals receive basic mental health training, similar to first-aid certification ([Fricchione et al. 2012](#)). Partnerships with universities or NGOs can support low-cost training programmes, while peer-support models can offer structured guidance without requiring licensed therapists. Future research should explore the effectiveness of this framework in enhancing traveller well-being and industry adoption.

### *Positioning transformational tourism framework within existing tourism models*

Tourism research has evolved significantly from traditional models focusing on tourist satisfaction to frameworks emphasizing co-creation and experience design. One of the most influential contributions in this area is [Neuhofer's \(2025\)](#) framework for positive tourism experiences, which conceptualizes tourism as a co-created, technology-enhanced experience designed to optimize engagement and satisfaction. While this model has provided valuable insights into how tourists interact with service providers, it does not explicitly address the role of tourism in fostering long-term psychological transformation and well-being.

In contrast, the transformational tourism framework proposed in this study is

specifically designed to facilitate healing, mental health recovery and emotional resilience in vulnerable tourists. Unlike Neuhofer’s model, which emphasizes experience enhancement, our framework integrates stakeholders such as mental health professionals, host communities and tourism service providers to provide structured, long-term support for travellers undergoing psychological transformation.

Comparing these models provides critical insights into the shifting paradigms in tourism research – from designing pleasurable experiences to leveraging tourism as a therapeutic intervention for well-being. [Table 2](#) provides a comparative analysis of our proposed transformational tourism framework and Neuhofer’s framework outlining key differences in theoretical grounding, stakeholder roles and application in tourism research.

Table 2: Comparison of framework for transformational tourism design for stakeholders and Neuhofer’s framework for positive tourism experiences.

**Table outlining how a conceptual framework for transformational tourism design for stakeholders differs from Neuhofer's framework for positive tourism experiences, element by element.**

<i>Element</i>	<i>Transformational tourism design for stakeholders</i>	<i>Neuhofer's framework for positive tourism experiences</i>
Core focus	Transformational tourism for vulnerable tourists, particularly those with mental health challenges.	Designing positive tourism experiences through experience co-creation and interdisciplinary integration.
Key stakeholders	Vulnerable tourists, transformational travel councils, mental health support specialists, tourism service suppliers, host communities.	Tourists, experience designers, hosts, tourism providers, trainers, health specialists.
Theoretical basis	Rooted in psychological and therapeutic tourism, emphasizing mental health recovery and resilience.	Draws from experience economy, co-creation theory and well-being models.

Process flow	A structured journey from pre-trip, during-trip and post-trip interventions.	Focuses on designing immersive and co-created experiences that lead to well-being.
Application	Targeted mental health support in tourism, emphasizing sustainable well-being beyond the trip and the iteration of it.	Enhancing tourism experience design to promote general well-being and positive emotions.
Outcome goals	Long-term mental health improvement, resilience-building and emotional transformation.	Short-term positive experiences, meaningful interactions and psychological enrichment.

Our transformational tourism framework stands apart from existing models by intentionally embedding healing, caregiving and empathy as core design principles. Unlike traditional tourism models that primarily emphasize leisure, relaxation or cultural exchange, our framework is explicitly structured to facilitate deep psychological transformation for vulnerable travellers, particularly those experiencing mental health challenges.

Research has shown that intentional and immersive travel experiences can lead to significant shifts in self-perception, emotional resilience and well-being ([Smith and Diekmann 2017](#); [Pritchard et al. 2011](#)). However, existing tourism models have not systematically integrated stakeholder-supported mental health interventions into the travel experience. Our model bridges this gap by fostering sustained well-being not only for the traveller but also for those facilitating the experience.

## Conclusion

As tourists' needs become more complex, travel service suppliers are forced to possess a deeper understanding of what those needs are in order to design transformative experiences. It is no longer enough to stage pleasurable experiences; instead, it is critical to understand the complexities of the desired outcome post-trip. Incorporating a mental health-focused approach in tourism is no longer optional but essential. This conceptual study fills the research gap on

vulnerable tourists and explores the key stakeholders required in the transformational tourism system in order to achieve transformative outcomes. The participation of trained mental health specialists in tourism experience design may not have been a norm in the past, but their inclusion would support tourism service suppliers in providing meaningful transformative travel services to travellers with mental disorders. More importantly, this study extends existing study by [Chaves et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Neuhofer \(2024\)](#), with the concept of using trained staff, by including trained mental health specialists and vulnerable tourists with depression in the transformative tourism system.

## Limitations

We are mindful of the risks involved in customizing experiences for vulnerable tourists and that tourists with depression or any mental disabilities may not wish to declare their weaknesses while on holiday. However, as [McLain \(2023\)](#) argues, experience designers ought to understand what these risks might be that could be translated into opportunities for a new experience.

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