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Editorial: Designing experiences for transformation and sustainable futures

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Guest editorial:

Designing experiences for transformation and sustainable futures

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Introduction

The 7th Experience Summit 2023, themed “Transformational Experiences Beyond Borders: Partnership Development for Sustainable Futures,” set out to address the latest developments in experience research towards building a sustainable future. As one of its core goals, the summit highlighted the need for interdisciplinary collaboration among multidisciplinary scholars and practitioners to foster innovative research and practice in the field of experience research (Neuhofer, Goh, & Tan, 2023). Designing experiences can trigger transformations at the individual and group level that contribute to sustainable and resilient societies.

This special section explores experience research from diverse perspectives, focusing specifically on the intersection between transformative experiences and sustainable futures. Spanning multiple sectors -- including hospitality, tourism, heritage, and events – these studies engage with a range of theoretical frameworks and innovative methodological approaches to deepen our understanding and discussion of experience research. It is our pleasure to introduce a collection of five papers, each offering valuable insights into the conceptualization, design, communication, and marketing of transformative experiences.

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Experience research in hospitality and tourism – state of the art

The world is undergoing an unprecedented transition marked by transformative shifts that affect how customer experiences are designed, created, and consumed. Technological advancements, sociodemographic change, and sustainable transformation (Neuhofer, 2024) are reshaping the way experiences can help guide individual growth and collective sustainability. In the transformation economy, the emphasis is on meaningful, customized, and transformative experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2011; Rossman & Duerden, 2019).

Rooted in the seminal work on the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 2011) and grounded in interdisciplinary insights from psychology, sociology, and education, the intentional design of experiences has become critical for driving human learning and transformation (Mezirow, 1997; Rossman and Duerden, 2019). The hospitality and tourism industry is positioned to offer such experiences in liminal spaces, such as festivals and volunteer tourism (Kirillova et al., 2017; Tomazos & Murdy, 2023), through the integration of storytelling and gamification (Chen et al., 2023; Soulard & Lundin, 2023), and through encounters with nature and humans that foster deep personal reflection, behavioural change, and environmental stewardship (Neuhofer et al., 2021; Sheldon, 2020).

The discourse around transformative experiences has emerged in the hospitality and tourism literature, highlighting a series of wide-ranging benefits and outcomes of tourism experiences for well-being and happiness (Filep & Laing, 2019). These include the positive effects of travel on health and wellness (Chen & Petrick, 2013), benefits for family relationships (Durko & Petrick, 2013), spiritual experiences for self-development (Parsons et al., 2019), the pursuit of happiness and human flourishing (Filep & Laing, 2019), inner journeys for consciousness transformation (Sheldon, 2020), and the significance of hedonic and eudaimonic experiences (Yu et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship has proposed a hierarchical experience type framework (ETF) with key attributes for ordinary and extraordinary experience types (Duerden et al., 2018). Namely, emotion, insight, and change produce memorable, meaningful, and transformative experiences, respectively. Empirical examinations of the ETF have supported its proposed structure and shown that transformative experiences are stronger predictors of net promoter scores than the other experience types (Duerden et al., 2023). Wu et al. (2024) developed a “HEAL model that outlines the transformative functions of hospitality and tourism experiences to Harbor, Evolve,

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3 Awaken and Link individuals, while Neuhofer (2024) examines the long-term integration of
4 transformation for personal well-being and growth.
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8 **Experience research applied – a collection of selected papers**

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10 Theoretically, the topics encompass knowledge creation tools, the role of trust, conceptual
11 distinctions in experience design, mythmaking in cultural tourism, and the use of storytelling
12 for impactful event marketing. Methodologically, the studies use qualitative and quantitative
13 approaches, including meta-analysis, relational frameworks, conceptual analysis, and visual
14 analysis techniques. Experience design is inherently cross-disciplinary, and the varied
15 perspectives included in this collection deepen our understanding in that regard.
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22 This first paper offers a critical methodological contribution that aligns with the 7th Experience
23 Summit's theme of "Transformational Experiences Beyond Borders" by examining the use of
24 phenomenology as a method for understanding tourism experiences. The paper entitled:
25 "Progress or regress in phenomenological research in tourism?: An epistemological assessment
26 of bibliometric analysis and visualisation tools" by Pernecky and Faisal (2024) uses a meta-
27 analysis, through which the authors assess VOSviewer, a popular bibliometric visualisation
28 tool, and its role in advancing or hindering phenomenological research in tourism. The study
29 highlights concerns around transparency, traceability, and epistemic correspondence when
30 relying on bibliometric data. They urge academics to adopt critical perspectives and not to
31 over-rely on these tools when assessing knowledge. Several limitations in visualisation
32 practices are discussed. The paper contributes to experience research in that it encourages a
33 more reflective and robust approach to using technological tools in tourism experience
34 research.
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46 The second paper by Basstiaansen and Duerden (2024), conceptualises meaningful
47 experiences. It contributes to the summit's theme in that it advances the understanding of
48 meaningful experiences in the fields of hospitality, tourism, and leisure. As interest in
49 experience design grows, there is a need for a framework to study meaningful experiences in-
50 depth. One particularly important aspect is the differentiation between memorable, meaningful,
51 and transformative experiences. The authors propose a refined conceptualisation of, and key
52 processes associated with meaningful experiences, suggesting that through autobiographical
53 memories, individuals can connect with key sources of meaning-making, thus rendering these
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3 experiences personally significant and therefore meaningful. The paper's main practical
4 contribution lies in offering strategies to design for and study meaningful experiences.
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10 The third paper by Lee and Ryan (2025) addresses the theme of "Transformational Experiences
11 Beyond Borders" by exploring the dynamics of exhibitor loyalty within the B2B exhibition
12 industry, by looking at the case of Seoul, South Korea. Through an analysis of 240 exhibitors,
13 the authors examine how trust influences participation, citizenship behaviours, and loyalty. The
14 findings reveal that repeat exhibitors demonstrate higher levels of proactive behaviour and
15 loyalty when trust is present. The study moreover identifies "citizenship behaviour" as a
16 primary predictor of loyalty. The paper contributes to the MICE (Meetings, Incentives,
17 Conferences, Exhibitions) industry and practice by showing how practitioners can foster long-
18 term loyalty. A theoretical framework and practical strategies for trust-based exhibitor
19 engagement are offered, providing valuable implications for building sustainable relationships
20 and partnerships around personally engaging experiences.
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30 The fourth paper, authored by Celuch, Neuhofer, and Rihova (2025), explores the role of
31 metaphors in marketing transformative event experiences. Closely aligned with the summit's
32 theme it highlights the topic of personal transformation and examines how business events can
33 drive and design for positive change. The study adopts a two-step qualitative methodological
34 approach involving hand drawings and sentence completion exercises. Through the analytical
35 lens of brand archetypes, the study reveals that the brand archetypes Sage, Explorer, and
36 Magician resonate most with participants in transformative events. The study offers novel
37 insights into how to leverage archetype narratives and visual storytelling for event marketing
38 that can enhance the impact of transformative events in the short and long term.
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48 The fifth and final paper of this collection, authored by Steriopoulos (2025), focuses on "The
49 influence of myths in shaping iconic brands at heritage tourist destinations." It examines the
50 role of mythmaking in how iconic brands at heritage tourism sites are created and perceived.
51 Specifically, the study investigates how iconic heritage brands that are rich in symbolic
52 meaning are shaped by the personal stories and connections of tourists. A framework for
53 mythmaking in heritage tourism is proposed. The authors highlight the importance of a co-
54 creative process, where tourists' unique experiences and storytelling contribute to a shared
55 brand myth. The findings discussion reveals that co-creation not only enhances the heritage
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3 experience but also reinforces tourists' personal identities, underlining the transformative
4 effect that myth and storytelling can play in heritage tourism. The study provides a valuable
5 contribution to experience research through the discussion of brand symbolism and meaning
6 co-creation, which can be applied in experience design in a wide range of cultural tourism
7 contexts.
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11 12 13 **Final Remark and Acknowledgement**

14 We invite researchers to explore this special collection through the lens of the experience
15 paradigm. The full proceedings of the 7 Experiences Summit also provide further insights and
16 ideas for future interdisciplinary collaborations (Neuhofer, Goh, & Tan, 2023). We would like
17 to thank the Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research editors and editorial board for their
18 support in reviewing this collection.
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