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## From the fluidity of the experience economy to transformative experiences as a catalyst for positive change: the future of experiential travel

The travel behaviour of today's increasingly experienced tourists is constantly changing and a value shift from global consumerism towards more personalised and meaningful experiences that encourage personal growth and transformation can be witnessed (Packer and Gill, 2017). The demand for immersive and emotionally rich experiences is growing and in-person interaction with local communities and real human connections are gaining in momentum. At the same time, experienced tourists desire perspective-shifting itineraries that challenge the status quo, inspire them on a deeper level, foster global citizenship and comprise developmental qualities that encourage personal transformation (Jantzen, 2013). Thus, travelling is increasingly understood as a catalyst for deeper connections with the self, nature, places and people. This shift is also reflected in the progression of economic value towards transformative experiences, self-actualisation and expansion of the mind (Pine and Gilmore, 2013; Skift, 2019). However, as the process of identity construction can be everlasting and individuals aim to engage in peak experiences and flow, a dialectical tension emerges. The mutual dependency between partaking and reminiscing experiences and the increasing sophistication of tourists and their demand challenges tourism suppliers to be more innovative in creating experiences that are transformative (Seeler, 2018). To remain relevant in the future of experiential travel, tourism businesses need to transform while also keeping in mind their responsibility towards a more sustainable development of the tourism industry. Transformations of tourism businesses, particularly in the sphere of collaborative consumption, in turn can lead to the transformation of local communities which then impact global communities. Taking a prospective lens and critically reflecting on the future of experiential travel needs more attention and this special issue is a first milestone in deepening the knowledge on the who, why and what behind transformative experiences in experiential travel.

## Who is transformed and why?

In a thought-provoking way, the 17 international scholars of this special issue share in nine articles their empirical findings, thoughts and ideas on the future of experiential travel. Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie introduce seven micro trends associated with the changing consumer behaviour and implications for the experience economy. The futurologists synthesise that not only tourists themselves possess an increasingly fluid identity expressed by a hybrid travel behaviour, the experience economy itself is a fluid concept. This fluidity represents the future of experiential travel meaning that tourism businesses constantly need to reinvent themselves and innovate their offerings to meet the demand of the experience-hungry tourists. The authors predict that despite having digitally exposed personalities, the hybrid tourist of the future aims to escape modernity, is authentic-seeking and craves human interaction in a non-digital environment. The constantly connected consumer is also addressed by Urquhart who proposes three potential directions of technological mediation in the future of experiential tourism. These range from mass acceptance and fully automated, de-humanised experiences to digital-free travel and authentic dialogue and interaction. More commonly applied is the middle alternative, summarised as experiential convergence, which might be the easiest to implement and justify. However, its future-proofness needs to be more critically discussed particularly with regard to the experienced tourists' desire for transformation.

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Often labelled as “digital natives”, Robinson and Schänzel explore the behavioural changes of Generation Z and suggest a theoretical framework based on findings derived from qualitative interviews and blog entries with Generation Z travellers in New Zealand. The authors found that the age cohort values experiences over possessions and demands a more traveller-centric approach. Although they are open-minded towards new experiences and off-the-beaten path travel, their transformative experiences are often defined by the bucket list approach acquired through social media and driven by the desire for epistemic transformation and not necessarily personal transformation. In analysing transformative travel experiences of Chinese Millennial mountain bikers on the Qinghai–Tibet Highway, Folmer, Tengxiage, Kadijk and Wright provide a perspective of this market segment that goes beyond the dominating image of Chinese package and group holidaymakers. The authors conclude that Chinese Millennial adventure tourists’ experiences are life changing and phenomenologically transformative. While aiming for freedom of parental control and advancing social status through independence, respondents only realised upon reflections that it was the physical and emotional suffering throughout the challenging journey that led to long-term memorability and growth towards more personal resilience. This finding demonstrates that transformations need continuous reflective and interactive processing of that experience.

By looking at transformative experiences in educational travel of Generation Z travellers, Wee addresses the critical role of reflections to achieve students’ personal growth and advances of personal identity through embodied learning and experiential mobilities. The author challenges the transformative potential of traditional classroom learning and claims that the students’ narrative reflections on their “out of classroom experience” during a field trip to Corfu encouraged them to understand places beyond theoretical idealism and created an awareness of real-life realism. A rethinking of traditional tourist typologies is pushed forward, not only as Generation Z travellers are an upcoming force in tourism and their consumption habits will have an impact on various stakeholders involved in experiential travel, but their reflections demonstrate their ability to decipher the tourism industry’s future challenges. One such change is Generation Z’s attitudes towards food consumption and experiences. Bertella and Vidmar propose food tourism as a force of change and catalyst for global food justice and sustainability. Instead of commodifying food in the form of “gastronomic theatres in which chefs play with food to entertain guests”, the authors see food tourism more as a remake of the Grand Tour where personal growth and transformation were sought through education. The authors provide a utopian scenario, inspired by a factual company on Svalbard (Norway), that has the potential to transform the global community towards the fulfilment of several sustainable development goals of the UN.

In critically asking whether the guest or the host communities is (and will be) transformed through experiential travel and collaborative consumption, Guttentag provides insights into transformative experiences via Airbnb. Although tourists seek peer-to-peer short-term rentals mainly to satisfy their quest for authenticity, memorability and personal transformation, the author questions the likelihood and effectiveness of these personal transformations through Airbnb. Instead, Guttentag argues that the changing nature of Airbnb stimulates a touristification process that will continue to transform local communities, possibly even more than the tourists themselves. Zmyslony and Wędrawicz introduce the urban leisure format (ULF) as another form of temporary and less disruptive local community transformation through experiential travel in cities. The authors note that by applying a “light” and more informally standardised formula in designing and implementing these staged and structured experiences in the form of community-driven, locally organised seasonal short-lived and place-time based events, there is a higher likelihood of preserving localism while meeting global consumers’ expectations. The success of ULFs lies in the ability to adopt localities to transnational trends and allow repeatability and replicability while limiting long-term transformation of spaces. Tresidder and Deakin look at historic buildings in the context of experiential travel and discuss the reinvention of heritage and transformational reuse of historical sites towards extraordinary experiencescapes. Using two examples from the UK, the authors illustrate how continuous innovation and reinterpretation of heritage can lead to historically rich, differentiated and inimitable places that meet the needs of today’s experiential tourist. In doing so, cultural heritage and sites are preserved, and their stories carried to the next generations of

experience-hungry and curious tourists. With their closing quote from Bob Marley, the authors remind the reader of the importance of reflecting on the past to allow for positive transformation in the future – personally and globally. “In this bright future you can’t forget your past”.

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