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Review

State-of-the-Art Review on the Rise of Experiential and Transformative Travel: Reassessing Value, Meaning and Impact

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Abstract

Experiential and transformative travel are increasingly central in tourism scholarship and "life-changing" marketing, yet the proliferation of these labels has produced conceptual drift and persistent accountability gaps. This paper presents a narrated critical integrative review that distinguishes experiential travel from transformative travel and synthesizes how value, meaning-making, impact and methods are theorized across stakeholders and time. Searches of Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection, supplemented by citation chasing, yielded 1284 records; screening produced 168 tourism-focused and 103 foundational sources (271 total). Iterative coding indicates that experiential research commonly foregrounds experience design and short-horizon valuation, whereas transformative research emphasizes change-over-time yet often relies on tourist self-narratives. Across both streams, valuation expands from transactional utility to affective, existential and ethical registers but remains frequently tourist-centred; meaning-making is patterned by narrative scripts and platform mediation; and impacts are distributed and ambivalent across tourists, hosts/communities, environments and institutions. Methodologically, claims about durability and justice are often unsupported by designs that assess persistence, comparison and distribution. This state-of-the-art review paper contributes working definitions and boundary conditions, an integrative framework linking antecedents, encounter mechanisms, valuation and multi-stakeholder impacts, and a method-specified research agenda with minimum reporting standards to support accountable research and practice.

Keywords: transformative tourism; experiential travel; value and meaning-making; tourism narratives; multi-stakeholder impacts; method–claim alignment; critical/decolonial tourism; integrative review

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1. Introduction

Tourism has increasingly been described not simply as leisure but as a domain in which people seek meaning, identity work, and change. This shift is visible in the growing prominence of *experiential* and *transformative* travel in scholarship and industry discourse. Yet the rapid expansion of these terms has created a conceptual problem: "experiential" and "transformative" are often used interchangeably, applied to very different practices, and supported by inconsistent assumptions about what "value" is, who benefits, and how change should be assessed (Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Reisinger, 2013; Kirillova et al., 2017). As a result, the field risks conceptual drift, where transformation becomes either a vague synonym for memorable experience or a marketing promise detached from theory, method, and ethics.

Part of the confusion stems from the different intellectual lineages that underpin these ideas. Experiential travel is frequently associated with the experience economy and with managerial or design-oriented approaches that treat experience as something staged, curated, and consumed (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). However, the roots of experiential thinking extend further back into experiential consumption scholarship, where experiences are understood as symbolic, affective, and narrative forms of value (e.g., Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Arnould & Price, 1993). Transformative travel, by contrast, is typically framed as a more enduring reconfiguration of perspectives, identity, and values—often drawing on humanistic psychology and learning-oriented accounts of change (Maslow, 1964; Mezirow, 2000; Reisinger, 2013). These traditions overlap, but they are not identical. Without clearer boundaries, it becomes difficult to distinguish (a) an experience that is intense, meaningful, or authentic from (b) a process that generates sustained cognitive, ethical, or behavioural change over time.

A second challenge concerns *valuation* and *evaluation*. Mainstream tourism research has been highly effective at measuring satisfaction and behavioural intention, and at linking experience attributes to outcomes through survey-based models (Williams & Soutar, 2009; Yeh et al., 2024). However, experiential and transformative travel claims extend beyond satisfaction: they imply shifts in meaning-making, relational responsibility, and sometimes moral or political orientation (Lean, 2009; Filep et al., 2016). At the same time, empirical work on transformation often relies on short-term self-report narratives, raising questions about durability, social desirability, and whose definitions of "positive change" become normalized (Kirillova et al., 2017). The evaluation problem is therefore not only methodological; it is conceptual and ethical: value cannot be assumed to be located solely in the tourist's feelings, and transformation cannot be treated as inherently benign or universally desirable.

A third challenge is *scope*. Much of the literature privileges the travelling subject and the moment of experience, while giving less attention to the structural conditions that shape access, interpretation, and consequences, especially for host communities and ecosystems. Calls for reflexivity, co-creation, authenticity, and ethical engagement are now common (Voigt et al., 2011; Rickly, 2016), yet these concepts can be mobilized in ways that obscure power, commodify "care," or reproduce inequalities through the very practices presented as progressive (Sharpley & Stone, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013). If transformation is to remain a meaningful research construct, it must be examined as relational and context-dependent: shaped by histories, institutions, and uneven capacities to define what counts as value, meaning, and impact.

Against this backdrop, this article offers a critical, narratively integrated review of experiential and transformative travel. The objective is not to provide an exhaustive inventory of studies, but to consolidate key conceptual threads, clarify boundary conditions, and synthesize what the literature enables and what it tends to overlook. The review is organized to produce two concrete outputs for the field: a definitional clarification that distinguishes experiential from transformative travel and specifies the scope of this review (summarized in Table 1), and an integrative framework that links concepts of value, meaning-making, and impact across stakeholders and over time (presented in Figure 1), which then grounds a method-specified future research agenda.

Core contributions of this State-of-the-Art Review are fourfold: (1) definitional clarification and boundary conditions that distinguish experiential from transformative travel (Table 1); (2) an integrative framework that connects encounter mechanisms, valuation and meaning-making, and distributed impacts across stakeholders and time (Figure 1); (3) a critical reframing of value and meaning-making that foregrounds power, positionality, and multi-stakeholder consequences rather than tourist-only outcomes; and (4) a

method-specified agenda, including minimum reporting standards that align experiential, transformative, and impact claims with evidence thresholds.

Table 1. Working definitions and boundary conditions used in this review *.

Dimension	Experiential Travel (Working Use Here)	Transformative Travel (Working Use Here)
Core idea	Experience as a value-generating episode created through encounters among tourists, providers and places.	Travel as a contingent process that can reconfigure meaning systems, identity, responsibilities or practices over time.
Working definition	Research that conceptualizes travel primarily through experience design/encounter and evaluates perceived value, meaning, memorability, satisfaction or engagement in/around the trip.	Research that explicitly theorizes or examines change beyond immediate experience (e.g., perspective shifts, identity work, ethical reorientation, behavioural change, relational consequences), with attention to durability or integration.
Primary analytic focus	How experiences are staged, curated, co-created, narrated and appraised as "valuable" or "meaningful."	How experience becomes consequential (or contested) through reflection, narration, learning, incorporation into everyday life, and distribution of effects across stakeholders.
Temporal horizon	Mostly in situ and immediate post-trip appraisal; short-term evaluation is common.	Pre-trip orientations, in-trip mechanisms, and post-trip integration; emphasis on durability, recurrence, or delayed effects.
Typical "value" language	Perceived value, experience quality, memorability, authenticity, satisfaction, engagement.	Eudaimonic value, learning, self-formation, moral/ethical change, relational responsibility; value can be uneven or negative.
Mechanisms commonly invoked	Staging/design, immersion, co-creation, service encounter quality, affective intensity, authenticity cues.	Disruption/liminality, awe or discomfort, reflection, narrative identity work, learning/transformative learning, relational encounters and responsibility.
Outcomes emphasized	Enjoyment, satisfaction, loyalty, well-being, memorable tourism experiences; sometimes meaning and identity as "experience outcomes."	Enduring shifts in interpretation and practice; changes may be partial, reversible, ambivalent, or contested rather than uniformly "positive."
Who is centred	Typically the tourist as evaluator; other stakeholders appear mainly as experience enablers.	Multi-stakeholder consequences are foregrounded: tourists, hosts/communities, environments, institutions; asks who benefits and who bears costs.
Evidence base (typical)	Cross-sectional surveys, experiments, service design research, post-trip recall; limited longitudinal verification.	Qualitative narratives/interviews/diaries dominate; growing use of longitudinal follow-ups, mobile methods, mixed methods and participatory approaches.
Boundary conditions in this review	Included when "experience" is the primary analytic object and the paper contributes to value/meaning/impact debates in tourism travel contexts.	Included when the work explicitly engages transformation as change-over-time and/or considers distribution of impacts; excluded when "transformative" is used in unrelated senses (e.g., generic service/organizational transformation without travel-experience linkage).

* These definitions are analytical devices for this review. Transformation is treated as contingent, socially situated and uneven in its distribution of benefits and harms, rather than assumed to be universally positive.

The review is guided by three connected questions. First, how have experiential and transformative travel been conceptualized, and what distinct intellectual traditions have shaped their current usage? Second, how is "value" theorized and assessed within experiential and transformative travel research, and what is missed when evaluation remains centred on short-term tourist outcomes? Third, what theoretical, methodological, and ethical agenda is required to study transformation as a process that unfolds over time and across multiple stakeholders, rather than as a personalized outcome or a marketable promise?

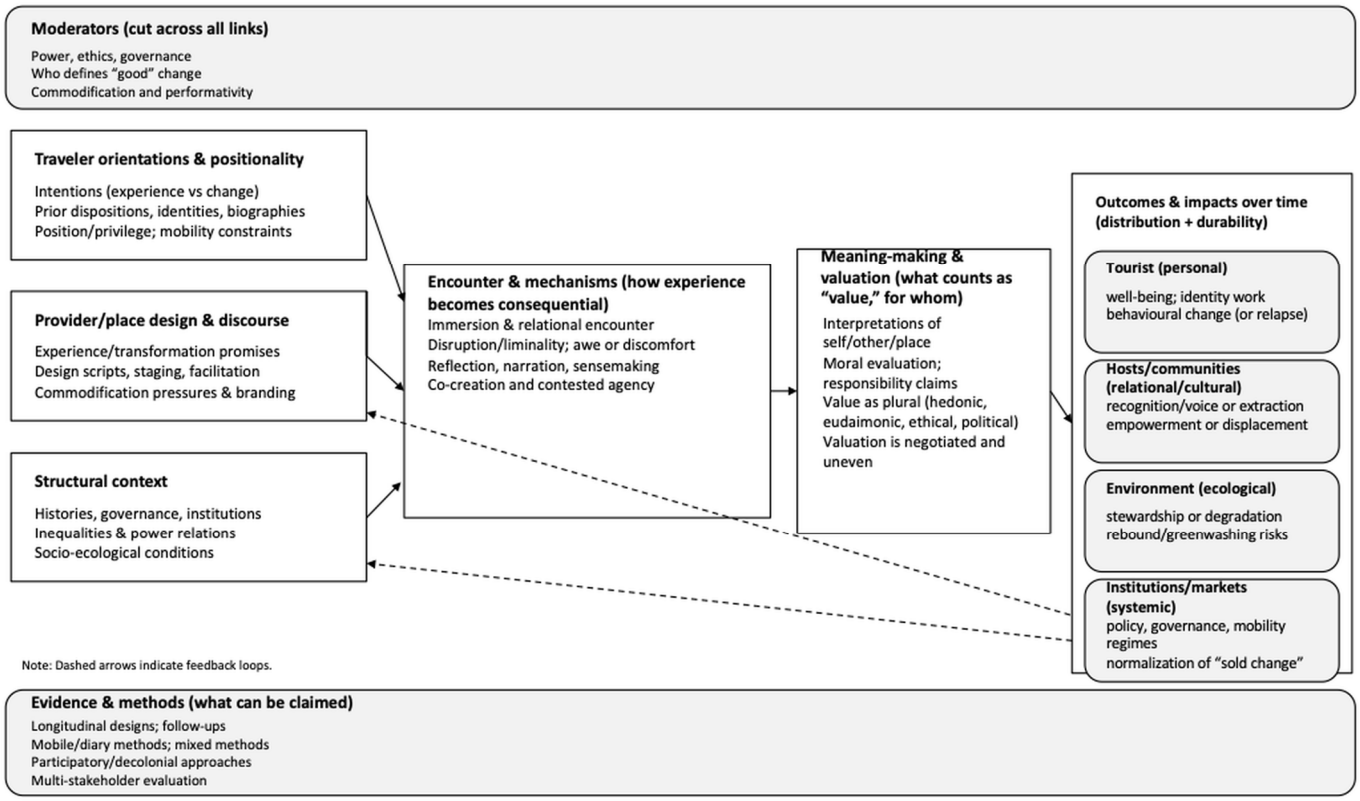


Figure 1. Integrative framework linking value, meaning-making and impact in experiential and transformative travel.

To reduce conceptual drift later in the manuscript, Table 2 maps commonly used adjacent labels (e.g., wellness, volunteer, spiritual, regenerative, decolonial/Indigenous tourism) onto the experiential versus transformative distinction applied here. Throughout, "transformative travel" is used in the strict sense defined in Table 1 unless stated otherwise.

Figure 1 previews the integrative logic used to synthesize the literature in Sections 3–7 by linking valuation, meaning-making mechanisms, and multi-stakeholder impacts across time and context. "Transformation" is treated as contingent and potentially ambivalent, requiring designs that can assess durability and the distribution of effects across stakeholders. An illustrative application of Figure 1 in empirical research is presented in Box 1.

Box 1. Illustrative application of Figure 1 in empirical research.

Consider a community-led, multi-day cultural immersion programme marketed as "transformative". Figure 1 can be operationalized as a design and analysis scaffold:

- Mechanisms (in-trip): document encounter processes via participant observation plus short daily diaries (immersion, disruption/liminality, guided reflection, co-creation moments, contested agency).
- Meaning-making and valuation: conduct post-trip narrative interviews to trace how participants define "value" (hedonic, eudaimonic, ethical/political) and what is ignored, resisted, or reinterpreted.
- Impacts (over time, multi-stakeholder): follow up at 3–12 months to assess integration into everyday practices; in parallel, evaluate host/community outcomes with community-defined indicators and benefit–burden mapping (and ecological indicators where relevant).
- Moderators/evidence constraints: examine who controls narrative authority, what harms/refusals occur, and which claims exceed the evidence.

Using the same scaffold across cases produces comparable "claim → mechanism → impact" traces and helps align ambitious transformative claims with the minimum methods required.

To aid readability, the manuscript distinguishes literature synthesis from the review's interpretive contribution; the latter is explicitly signposted in the "Synthesis and Implications" subsections at the end of each major section.

Table 2. Mapping adjacent tourism labels onto the experiential versus transformative distinction used in this review *.

Adjacent Label (Examples)	Typical Use in the Literature	How it Maps in This Review (Boundary Note)
Wellness/retreat/mindfulness tourism	Often framed around wellbeing, restoration, and curated experiences (sometimes marketed as "life-changing").	Usually experiential unless studies theorize and assess durable change beyond the trip and specify what counts as "better" (time logic + evaluation).
Volunteer/humanitarian/"impact" tourism	Frequently claims moral growth, empathy, and "making a difference"; can reproduce saviour narratives.	May be transformative only when change is evidenced over time AND distributed impacts are assessed (not tourist-only). Otherwise treated as experiential/meaningful participation.
Spiritual/pilgrimage/sacred-site tourism	Often mobilizes authenticity and liminality to explain meaning and identity shifts.	Can be transformative in the strict sense when research traces integration into everyday life; otherwise treated as experiential meaning-making.
Adventure/extreme/dark tourism	Emphasizes intensity, disruption, and memorable peak experiences.	Typically experiential; may be transformative only when disruption produces evidenced, durable reorientation (not just momentary arousal or narrative claim).
Decolonial/Indigenous-led tourism	Sometimes framed as transformative via justice, sovereignty, and alternative epistemologies.	Not automatically "transformative travel" for tourists. Treated as transformative only when the study specifies who transforms (tourists, hosts, institutions) and provides evidence for those claims.
Regenerative/sustainable/responsible tourism	Focuses on environmental/social outcomes and governance claims.	Maps primarily to the impact dimension: can be compatible with experiential or transformative travel, but requires multi-stakeholder indicators to support impact claims.

* Labels do not in themselves indicate transformation. In this review, "transformative travel" is reserved for work that theorizes and/or assesses durable change and explicitly engages questions of valuation, meaning-making, and distributed impacts (Table 1; Figure 1).

1.1. Review Approach: Narrated Critical Integrative Review

This article follows a narrated critical integrative review approach. Rather than aiming for an exhaustive catalogue, this approach is designed to (i) clarify contested concepts, (ii) synthesize convergent and divergent theoretical lines, and (iii) generate an integrative framework and research agenda usable for future scholarship. Compared with conventional systematic reviews in tourism—which typically prioritize comprehensive retrieval and standardized aggregation—a narrated critical integrative review is better suited to trace conceptual genealogies across disciplines and to connect conceptual claims (e.g., "transformation") to their methodological and ethical implications.

To strengthen transparency while retaining the narrated and integrative logic of the paper, the review was conducted in three iterative phases: scoping and boundary setting, corpus building through database searching and citation chaining, and analytic synthesis through iterative coding and framework construction.

1.1.1. Phase 1: Scoping and Boundary Setting

Phase 1 scoped definitions of experiential and transformative travel across tourism and adjacent studies and established the boundary conditions used in this review (Table 1). These scoping reads also informed the search terms, inclusion criteria, and the initial coding frame used in the analytic synthesis.

1.1.2. Phase 2: Search Strategy and Corpus Construction

Phase 2 built the corpus via Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection searches (1–7 December 2025; 1982–2025), supplemented by forward and backward citation chasing. Search strings combined tourism/travel terms with experiential and transformative terms; full strings and database syntax are reported in Appendix A.

Records were screened at title/abstract and then full-text level. Sources were included when they (a) engaged experiential and/or transformative travel in a tourism context and (b) contributed to questions of value, meaning-making, impacts, and/or methodological approaches; items using "transformative" in unrelated senses or lacking analytic substance were excluded (Appendix A).

Search and screening produced a core corpus of 168 tourism-focused sources plus 103 foundational/adjacent works retained for conceptual grounding, where repeatedly invoked in tourism scholarship (271 sources in total). Detailed flow counts, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and coding documentation are provided in Appendix A.

1.1.3. Phase 3: Analytic Synthesis and Framework Construction

Analytic synthesis proceeded through iterative coding and constant comparison. Each included source was read and coded for: (i) how experiential and/or transformative travel was defined (or implicitly assumed), (ii) the mechanisms proposed to link travel to value and change (e.g., immersion, disruption, reflection, co-creation, narration), (iii) the outcomes claimed and how durability was treated (momentary affect, meaning-making, identity shifts, behavioural change, relational or ethical outcomes), (iv) whose outcomes were centred (tourists, hosts, environments, institutions), and (v) methods and evidence types used (e.g., cross-sectional surveys, interviews, diaries, longitudinal follow-ups, ethnography, mixed methods). First-cycle codes were then clustered into higher-order analytic categories. These categories were refined through repeated reading, memo-writing, and comparison across time periods and research traditions.

This procedure produced the paper's major synthesis dimensions—value, meaning-making, and impact—and revealed recurring tensions that cut across traditions (e.g., individual-centred valuation vs multi-stakeholder consequences; short-term narrative accounts vs durability and verification; ethical aspiration vs commodification and power). The integrative framework presented in Figure 1 was developed by mapping these dimensions into a single explanatory structure that links antecedents, mechanisms, outcomes, and moderators across stakeholders and over time. Similarly, the conceptual timeline in Figure 2 was assembled by identifying widely used definitional anchors and conceptual turning points in the literature, then validating these choices through citation chaining and cross-checking how later studies mobilized earlier ideas.

This timeline traces experiential and transformative travel's conceptual evolution across psychology, sociology, marketing, and tourism. Foundational ideas—experience economy, existential authenticity, humanistic psychology, and co-creation—merge, marking critical shifts toward ethical reflexivity, decolonial critique, and relational, justice-oriented frameworks.

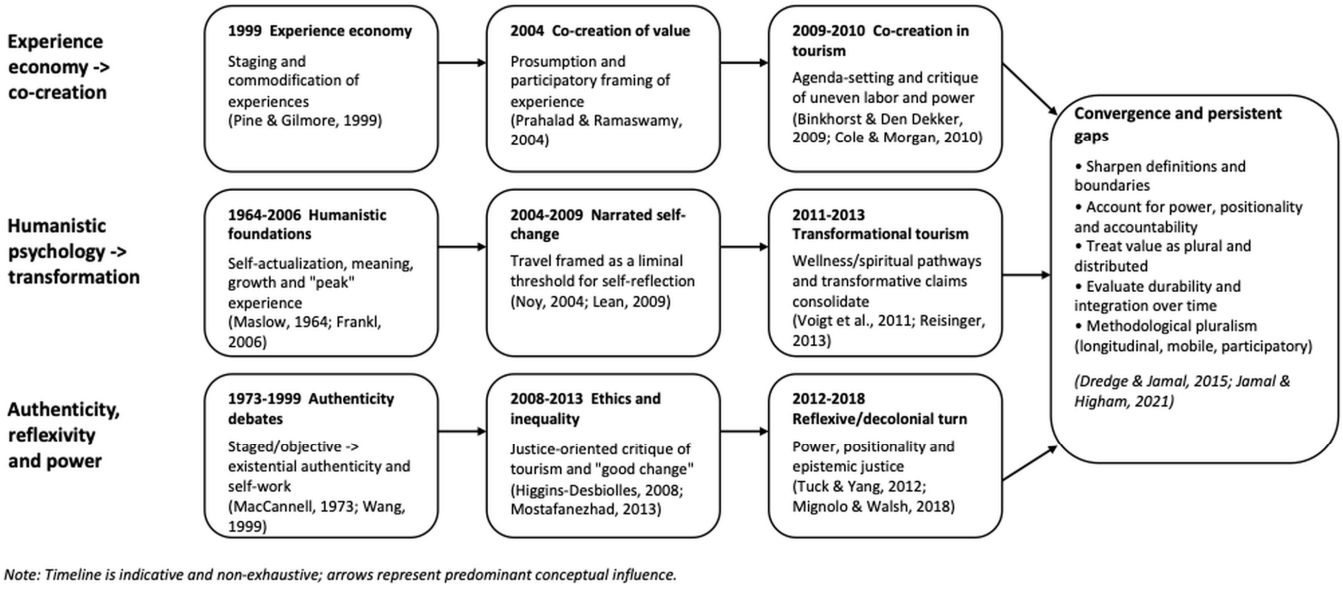


Figure 2. Conceptual timeline of experiential and transformative travel. (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Cole & Morgan, 2010; Maslow, 1964; Frankl, 1959/2006; Noy, 2004; Lean, 2009; Voigt et al., 2011; Reisinger, 2013; MacCannell, 1973; N. Wang, 1999; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008; Mostafanezhad, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Jamal & Higham, 2021).

1.1.4. Reflexivity and Limitations

Because narrated integrative reviews involve interpretive judgments (e.g., which conceptual lines to foreground and how to name thematic clusters), transparency about boundaries is essential. This review prioritizes peer-reviewed scholarship and influential conceptual works; consequently, it may under-represent grey literature or practitioner materials unless they have been taken up explicitly in academic debates. The review is also shaped by the search terms and database coverage; therefore, to reduce the risk of omission, database searching was complemented with citation chasing and targeted searches for conceptual roots. Finally, while the review critically interrogates normative claims embedded in "transformative" discourse, it does not presume transformation to be inherently positive or universally desirable; instead, it treats transformation as relational, context-dependent, and uneven in its distribution of benefits and harms.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 traces the conceptual genealogy of experiential and transformative travel and clarifies their points of convergence and divergence. Sections 3–5 synthesize the literature through the framework's core dimensions—value, meaning-making, and impact—highlighting how each has been theorized and studied and where key blind spots persist. Section 6 consolidates methodological implications in the existing literature and identifies designs capable of capturing durability, relational effects, and systemic consequences. Section 7 examines industry adoption and the risks associated with commodifying transformation. Section 8 translates the review into a gap-linked, question-driven, and method-specified research agenda, and Section 9 concludes with the integrative contribution and implications for tourism scholarship and practice.

2. Conceptual Foundations: A Genealogy of Experiential and Transformative Travel

The rise of experiential and transformative travel is not new, but its framing has evolved. It draws on multiple traditions: economics, psychology, anthropology, and critical theory. These ideas have been shaped by diverse scholars and shaped further in

practice—from luxury ecotourism in Costa Rica to community homestays in Nepal (Duffy, 2006). This section traces that evolution, highlighting how theories of value, selfhood, and experience have converged in tourism studies.

A visual overview of this progression is shown in Figure 2, mapping core conceptual contributions from 1999 to the present.

2.1. From Experience Economy to Co-Creation

Pine & Gilmore's "experience economy" (1999) reframed tourism value as something produced through staged, emotion-laden experiences. Destinations became arenas where meaning and authenticity could be designed and sold, and tourists were positioned as active participants in value production. Yet this shift was not ideologically neutral: commodifying emotion also commodified authenticity and folded "personal fulfilment" into market expansion (Caru & Cova, 2015; Chang, 2018).

The shift from "staged" experiences to "co-created" ones (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) promised collaborative authorship between tourists and hosts (Teoh et al., 2021). In transformative travel discourse, this language signals mutual engagement and reflective practice (Reisinger, 2013; Kirillova et al., 2017). Yet critical scholarship shows co-creation is often a managerial trope: it can mask persistent hierarchies and shift cultural and affective labour onto structurally disempowered hosts who are expected to perform intimacy and authenticity for tourist consumption (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Cole & Morgan, 2010; Wengel et al., 2019; Salazar, 2010).

Participation in co-creation is itself unequal. Linguistic proficiency, digital visibility (e.g., platform reviews and social media), visa mobility and socio-economic resources shape who can speak, be heard, and be recognized as "transformative" (Sin, 2010; Mostafanezhad, 2013). In this sense, co-creation can operate as a neoliberal euphemism that rebrands exclusion as empowerment (Bianchi & de Man, 2021).

Reframing co-creation for transformative tourism, therefore, requires more than experiential innovation or surface-level inclusion (Christou et al., 2025a). It demands attention to the social, economic, and epistemic structures that organize encounters—including gendered and racialized care work, the spatial politics of mobility, and managerial scripts that obscure labour (Ahmed, 2004; Silvey, 2006; Hooks, 1992; Fleming, 2021). In practice, this is visible when voluntourism or "impact" products choreograph tourists' empathy and gratitude as part of the experience, while local workers carry the emotional burden—a form of affective governance (governing encounters through expected emotions) that makes feeling look like justice.

An ethical reading of co-creation therefore asks: co-created by whom, for whom, and under what accountabilities? Treating co-creation as a justice-oriented practice requires attention to authorship, intention, benefit distribution, and the right to refuse.

2.2. Humanistic Psychology and Self-Actualization

The conceptual foundation of transformative tourism owes much to the enduring legacy of humanistic psychology, particularly the seminal contributions of Viktor Frankl, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. These early theorists emphasized intrinsic human capacities for growth, authenticity, and meaning, proposing models of flourishing that centred on self-actualization, autonomy, and emotional depth. Their influence is unmistakable in the shift within tourism discourse from external service provision to internal personal transformation (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018)—a reframing that now underpins wellness retreats (Y.-C. Wang et al., 2021), spiritual pilgrimages (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019; Dimou et al., 2025), and tourism programs (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Travel is thus cast as

a space not only for recreation, but for existential restoration, therapeutic insight, and ethical recalibration.

Maslow's (1964) articulation of a needs-based hierarchy and his concept of "peak experiences" provided the psychological scaffolding for viewing travel as a liminal threshold to personal awakening. Frankl's (1959/2006) existential emphasis on meaning through suffering, agency, and moral decision-making further infused tourism studies with the notion that discomfort, disorientation, and intercultural exposure could catalyze profound self-reflection (Lean, 2009; Reisinger, 2013). Such perspectives are frequently cited by scholars and practitioners alike to justify the design and promotion of "life-changing" experiences (Voigt et al., 2011; Noy, 2004). However, these frameworks are often applied uncritically, reproducing essentialist assumptions about the universality of transformative potential.

Humanistic paradigms centre individual autonomy and interiority, often treating structural factors (class, race, gender, mobility regimes) as background rather than constitutive of who travels and how "transformation" is recognized (Jamal & Higham, 2021; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). This risks depoliticized narratives of growth that universalize Western psychological ideals—what Spivak (1988) terms epistemic violence (when universalized standards silence other ways of knowing). In tourism research, this can occur when generic wellbeing or mindfulness scales are treated as universal indicators of "healing" in Indigenous or community-based contexts, displacing land- and kinship-based ontologies of wellbeing (Wilson, 2008).

Additionally, the increasing reliance on affective and psychometric measures—such as subjective well-being scores or post-travel reflections—contributes to what several scholars describe as the psychologization of transformation (McCabe & Johnson, 2013; M. K. Smith & Diekmann, 2017). In such approaches, complex intercultural or ethical tensions are collapsed into individual emotional responses, measured by their resonance rather than their consequences. As Mostafanezhad (2013) argues, this emotional reductionism can inadvertently validate exploitative encounters, so long as they are experienced as "meaningful" by the tourist.

To move beyond this conceptual narrowing, transformative tourism research must incorporate critical and interdisciplinary perspectives. Decolonial theory (Escobar, 2008; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) compels us to examine how transformation is shaped by power and colonial legacies. Feminist care ethics (Tronto, 1993; Gilligan, 1993) offers a relational lens to challenge the autonomous self as the default subject of transformation. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1978) frames transformation not as an inward journey, but as a dialogic, socially embedded process rooted in mutual recognition and the politicization of experience. These perspectives broaden the field's moral and epistemological horizon, demanding that we ask not only what transformation is, but for whom it is made possible, and at what cost.

Without sustained engagement with such critiques, the tourism field risks replicating neoliberal logics of self-optimization disguised as empowerment (Jernsand, 2017). A truly inclusive theory of transformative travel must account for the intersecting structures of power that shape *who* gets to grow, *who* is expected to facilitate that growth, and *whose* knowledges are legitimized in the process (Doering & Zhang, 2018; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008).

2.3. Authenticity, Reflexivity, and Power

Authenticity remains a key benchmark in tourism accounts of meaningful or transformative experience. The distinction between objective authenticity (historical/cultural veracity) and existential authenticity (felt self-realization) has been influential (N. Wang, 1999; Rickly-Boyd, 2013). Yet privileging existential authenticity can depoliticize the conditions under which "realness" is produced, marketed, and consumed (H. Kim & Jamal, 2007).

In transformative tourism, authenticity is rarely "found"; it is curated and commodified. Tourists may pursue authenticity as a tool for self-work (growth, healing, ethical identity) rather than as engagement with local lifeworlds (Lean et al., 2014; Kirillova et al., 2017). This can instrumentalize cultural difference within market logics of self-optimization, while shifting the burden of authenticity onto hosts who must perform identity and emotion to meet tourist imaginaries (Cole, 2007; Salazar, 2012; Hollinshead, 2007). A familiar example is the "cultural village" visit where rituals and storytelling are staged on schedule to satisfy expectations of the "real," with economic viability tied to tourist legibility (Bryon, 2012).

Reflexivity is often offered as an ethical corrective: travellers reflect on privilege and seek more respectful encounters. But reflexivity is not neutral or equally available; it depends on cultural and discursive capital and can become performative—a way to narrate good intentions (e.g., in blogs or debrief circles) without changing material relations (Jamal & Higham, 2021; Mostafanezhad, 2013).

Recent work reframes authenticity less as an attribute and more as a negotiated, politically charged process shaped by globalization, imaginaries, and uneven development (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008; Doering & Zhang, 2018). Feminist, decolonial, and affect perspectives show how being "moved" can coexist with touristic entitlement and structural inequality, so affective resonance cannot be taken as evidence of justice or transformation.

Accordingly, the key question is not whether an experience is authentic, but who can authorize authenticity, under what conditions, and with what consequences. This requires decentring the tourist gaze and foregrounding host/community perspectives in accounts of "personal transformation" (Cole & Morgan, 2010; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012).

2.4. Synthesis and Implications: Divergence, Integration and Gaps

The synthesis below consolidates the genealogy above to clarify where experiential and transformative travel converge, where they diverge, and which gaps follow from the boundary conditions adopted in this review.

Although often used interchangeably in academic and industry discourse, experiential and transformative tourism are underpinned by distinct conceptual logics that demand sharper theoretical differentiation. Experiential tourism generally foregrounds affective immersion, atmospheric design, and curated novelty, aligning with consumption-based models where experience becomes a product (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). By contrast, transformative tourism situates the tourist encounter as a site of existential disruption, moral reorientation, and identity recalibration (Reisinger, 2013; Kirillova et al., 2017). While both deviate from standardized mass tourism, their aims, assumptions, and mechanisms of change diverge in significant ways—one privileging emotional resonance, the other ethical and cognitive transformation.

Integrative models exist (Amaro et al., 2023; Kirillova & Lehto, 2015), but many remain partial because they rely on short-term, post-trip narratives and affective evaluations (McCabe & Foster, 2006). This can obscure nonlinear trajectories (including dissonance, discomfort, and failure) and leaves gaps around temporality, accountability, and power (Lean, 2009; Rickly, 2016). At a deeper level, individualized accounts often under-specify how mobility regimes, postcolonial histories, and neoliberal responsibilisation condition who can "transform" and what counts as change, marginalizing collective and land-based epistemologies (Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012; Bianchi, 2009; Wilson, 2008; Teo & Leong, 2006).

In response, transformative tourism scholarship increasingly advocates for more robust interdisciplinary approaches that move beyond descriptive typologies. Longitudinal mixed methods, mobile ethnography, and participatory action research are being proposed as methodological interventions that can capture transformation as a dynamic, layered,

and ethically fraught process (Stankov et al., 2022; Freire, 1978; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). Theoretical resources from feminist ethics (Tronto, 1993), cultural geography (Massey, 2005), and Indigenous studies (L. T. Smith, 2021) underscore the need to embed transformation within systems of relationality, responsibility, and situated knowledge.

Figure 3 synthesizes these conceptual contributions, illustrating how experiential and transformative tourism intersect with—and are shaped by—discourses on co-creation, reflexivity, ethics, and power. Yet the figure also points to unresolved tensions between individualistic and collective accounts of meaning-making. The field must now shift from cataloguing emerging themes to developing integrative frameworks that reckon with epistemic difference, structural inequity, and the moral stakes of claiming transformation. Doing so will require not only methodological pluralism but also a deeper ethical commitment to interrogating whose transformation is valued, whose voices are amplified, and whose realities remain bracketed.

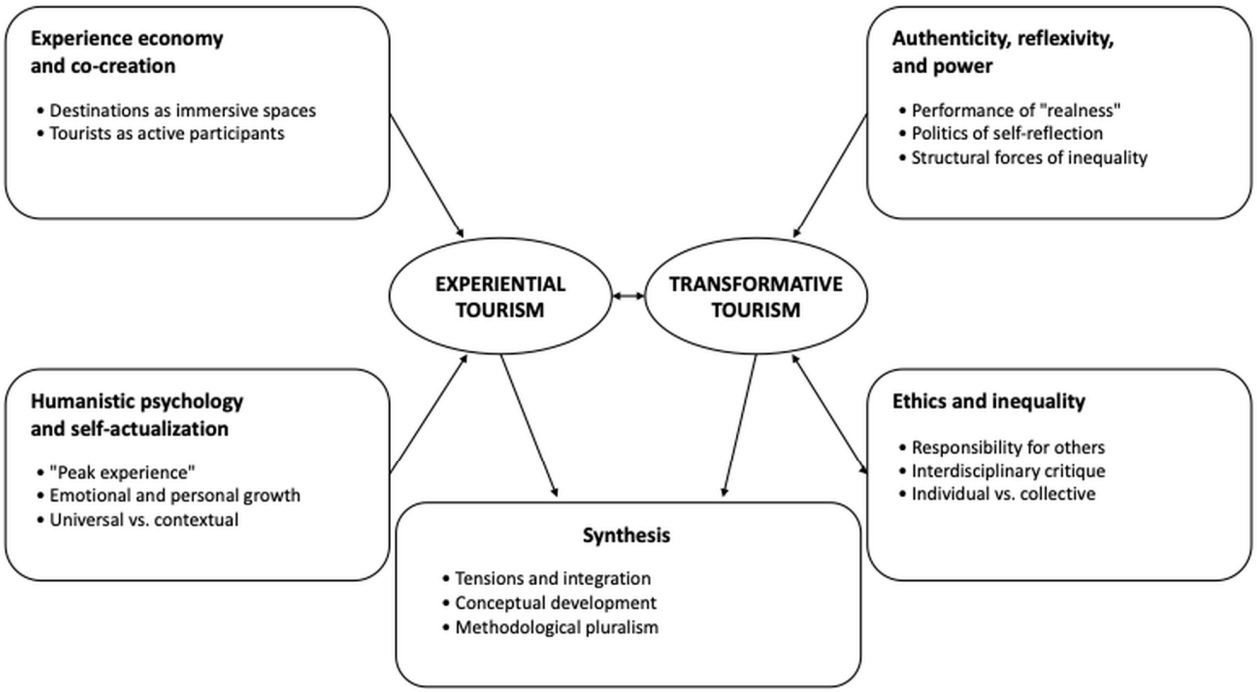


Figure 3. Conceptual foundations and convergent lineages of experiential and transformative tourism.

This diagram synthesizes key theoretical pillars that underpin experiential and transformative tourism. It highlights five interconnected domains: the commodification of experience and participatory frameworks (Experience Economy and Co-Creation), the psychological emphasis on personal growth (Humanistic Psychology and Self-Actualization), the performative and political nature of authenticity (Authenticity, Reflexivity, and Power), the moral and systemic dimensions of tourism ethics (Ethics and Inequality), and the emerging imperative for conceptual synthesis. The central "Synthesis" node underscores the need for integrative frameworks that address tensions, foster interdisciplinary dialogue, and promote methodological pluralism across tourism research.

3. Reframing Value in Tourism

In the integrative framework (Figure 1), "value" is not an outcome that simply appears after travel. It is a *valuation process*—a set of judgments about what counts as worthwhile change, for whom, and under what conditions. Rather than catalogue definitions, this review interrogates *what* value has meant, for *whom*, and *why* that matters. It emphasizes that understanding value is no longer a technical challenge—it is a moral, philosophical, and

political one; Figure 4 displays a conceptual outline of this evolution. This section therefore synthesizes how tourism research has moved from transactional and consumer-centric value models toward experiential, affective, and ethical framings, while showing that these shifts also intensify contestation over voice, power, and accountability. Rather than treating value as a technical measurement problem, the review treats valuation as a normative and political practice embedded in tourism's institutional and socio-ecological contexts.

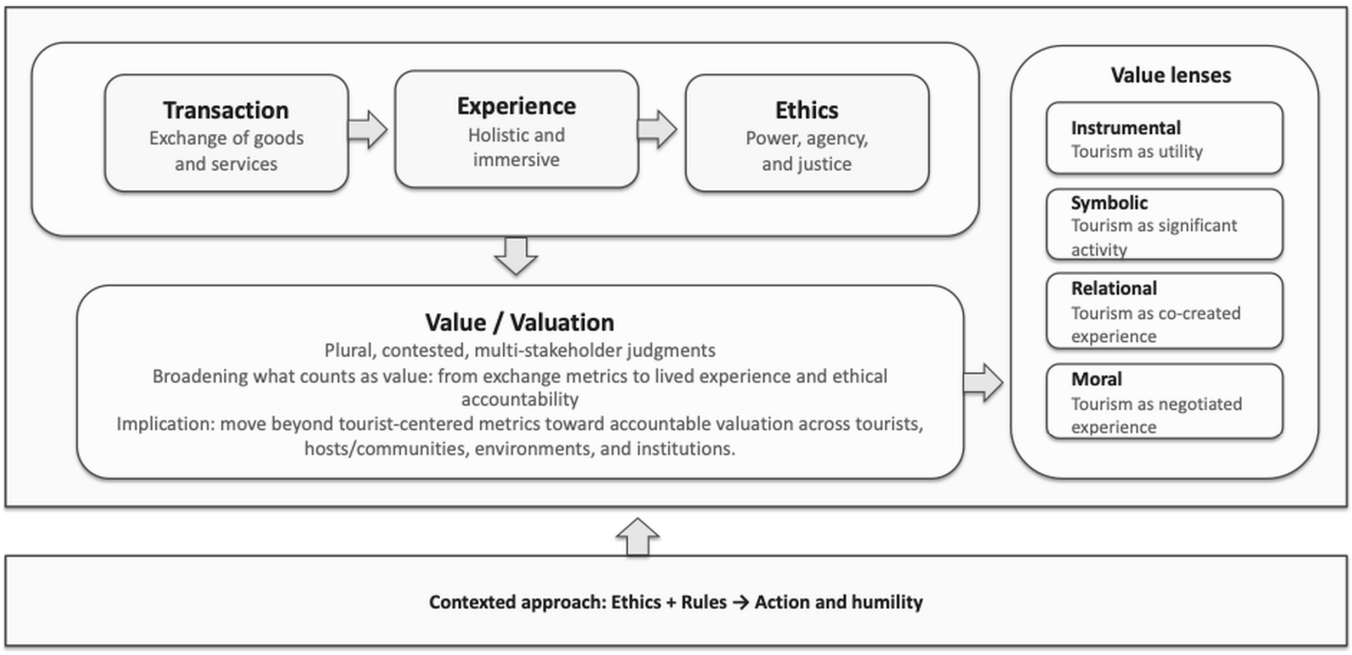


Figure 4. Reframing value in experiential and transformative tourism.

This figure contrasts traditional and emerging approaches to value in tourism. It illustrates a shift from transactional, market-driven metrics toward relational, affective, and ethical dimensions rooted in co-creation, lived meaning, and long-term impact. The diagram emphasizes that value in transformative tourism is not simply delivered—it is negotiated, felt, and often contested across social, cultural, and ecological contexts.

To keep the paper review-driven (not author-driven), the section is organized around four recurrent moves in the literature: (i) the shift from transactional utility to experience-based value, (ii) the expansion of value into emotional, ethical, and existential registers, (iii) the growing critique that value remains tourist-centred even within co-creation discourse, and (iv) the methodological consequences of claiming "transformative value" without designs capable of assessing durability and distribution. These moves provide the valuation foundation that the next section extends into meaning-making mechanisms (Figure 1: Encounter → Meaning-making/valuation).

3.1. From Transactional Utility to Experiential Co-Creation

Tourism research has historically grounded its understanding of value in models of transactional utility, largely derived from classical economics and service marketing. Within this paradigm, value was conceptualized as a quantifiable exchange between supplier and consumer, mediated by indicators such as price sensitivity, service quality, and repeat visitation (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Williams & Soutar, 2009; Calver & Page, 2013; Coudounaris et al., 2025). Performance metrics emphasized linear input-output logic: investments in infrastructure and amenities were expected to produce desirable outcomes like visitor satisfaction, economic returns, and destination competitiveness (UNWTO, 2019).

This utilitarian model was challenged by the rise of the experience economy, which reframed value as rooted in symbolic, affective, and narrative dimensions (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Within this discourse, tourists were reimagined as not just passive service recipients but became seen as active co-producers of value—seeking personal meaning, emotional resonance, and transformation through experience (Melis et al., 2022; Neuhofer, 2025). Scholars such as Holbrook (2006) and Oh et al. (2007) emphasized that value emerges in the interplay between the individual and the environment, with subjective interpretation eclipsing objective features of service delivery.

This experiential turn widened what counts as value, but it did not dissolve inequality. As discussed in Section 2.1, co-creation is often mobilized as an aspirational norm while asymmetries in voice, labour, and access persist; personalization can be engineered into therapeutic, photogenic self-discovery that aligns with neoliberal self-optimization (Salazar, 2012; Cole, 2007; Soulard et al., 2021; Saarinen, 2014). In such cases, "transformation" becomes a branding device rather than an ethically accountable practice.

The review therefore treats valuation as situated and contested: design scripts, market discourse, and mobility regimes shape who gets to define value and who benefits from it (Figure 1). For transformative tourism research, the task is to analyze these politics of value—including labour and representation—rather than treat value as a neutral preference or a proxy for "better experiences."

Interdisciplinary work (e.g., economic anthropology, cultural geography, critical management) helps surface hidden structures of reciprocity, spatial power, and depoliticized labour that shape how tourism value is produced and evaluated (Graeber, 2001; Cresswell, 2006; Fleming, 2021).

Transformative tourism cannot be reduced to affective transaction. It must be understood as a socio-political encounter embedded in histories of dispossession, systems of privilege, and competing epistemologies. The field must resist romanticizing co-creation and instead pursue frameworks that make space for epistemic justice, structural critique, and genuinely reciprocal transformation (Bourdieu, 1984).

3.2. Emotional, Ethical, and Existential Dimensions of Value

In response to mounting critiques of transactional and consumer-centric models of tourism value, academic discourse has progressively embraced emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions as foundational to understanding meaningful travel. This shift is more than semantic; it reflects a recalibration of tourism's epistemological and moral foundations, prompted by its entanglement in global emergencies like climate breakdown, biodiversity harm, and socio-cultural dispossession (Hall, 2019).

Emotional value, once considered peripheral, has emerged as central to both the design and evaluation of tourism experiences. Rather than focusing solely on pleasure or novelty, scholars now explore how vulnerability, empathy, awe, and even discomfort shape the perceived meaningfulness of travel (J. H. Kim et al., 2012; Arnould & Price, 1993). Visitors to sites of trauma, such as post-genocide Rwanda, often describe deeply emotional responses linked to moral reflection and historical witnessing (Viken et al., 2021). In wellness tourism, value is frequently associated with therapeutic introspection and affective healing (Voigt et al., 2011). Yet emotional resonance is not inherently ethical—affect can be complicit in voyeurism, moral tourism, or the commodification of suffering (Mostafanezhad, 2013).

This underscores the need for ethical frameworks that move beyond affective appeal. Tourism scholars increasingly advocate for value rooted in relational responsibility, reciprocal accountability, and context-sensitive care (Picard & Di Giovine, 2014; Palmer, 2017). Such perspectives align with environmental humanities and Indigenous epistemologies, which emphasize values like kinship, land stewardship, and spiritual interdependence

(Plumwood, 2002; L. T. Smith, 2021; K. P. Whyte, 2018). Empirical studies in Colombia and Aotearoa New Zealand highlight how communities prioritize ancestral continuity and ecological sacredness, challenging tourist-centric narratives of value (Nandasena et al., 2022; Gómez-Barris, 2017).

Existential value further complicates this terrain by casting tourism as a potential site for deep personal confrontation with mortality, identity, and moral purpose (Kirillova et al., 2017). Transformative encounters may catalyze insight, but they may also retraumatize, reinforce privilege, or romanticize dislocation—especially when stripped of historical and political context. As Buda et al. (2014) argue, existential disruption in tourism must be examined not only for what it reveals to the self, but for how it implicates others—ethically, emotionally, and structurally.

Ultimately, constructing a robust value framework requires more than accounting for affective depth. It demands critical attention to power, positionality, and the conditions under which meaning is legitimized or erased. Emotional resonance must be situated within systems of relational ethics, cultural accountability, and epistemic justice—otherwise, it risks becoming yet another commodity in the tourism value chain.

3.3. Value for Whom? Decentring the Tourist

While tourism research has significantly advanced in theorizing value, it continues to disproportionately privilege the tourist as the central subject of inquiry. Dominant models assess value through indicators such as visitor satisfaction, psychological well-being, or self-transformation—rendering host communities, ecosystems, and non-human agents as peripheral or instrumental (Dredge, 2022; Rastegar, 2025). This bias reflects an entrenched epistemic hierarchy in which tourists are positioned as the producers and beneficiaries of value, while hosts and environments are cast as backdrops, service providers, or facilitators (Wanitchakorn & Muangasame, 2021).

Even participatory paradigms such as co-creation frequently replicate this imbalance. Despite being framed as mutual and dialogic, many co-creation models operate within neoliberal and postcolonial structures that presume symmetric agency where asymmetries persist (Djohossou et al., 2023). For instance, in the case of community-based tourism initiatives in Vietnam, efforts marketed as empowering for women have instead reinforced existing gendered labour divisions, leaving patriarchal domestic hierarchies unchallenged (Schilcher, 2007). These dynamics demonstrate how discourses of value and empowerment can obscure rather than dismantle systemic inequities, especially when filtered through managerial or donor-driven logics.

Attempts to align business interests with social welfare—such as the "shared value" model (Porter & Kramer, 2011)—have gained traction in tourism. Yet these frameworks often falter without structural transformation or enduring local governance. In Zanzibar, community-based tourism projects collapsed following the withdrawal of NGO support, reflecting the fragility of externally imposed development agendas and the inadequacy of models that treat communities as project beneficiaries rather than epistemic co-authors (Mzee & Khamis, 2020; Mitchell & Muckosy, 2008). These failures underline the limits of technocratic solutions in addressing value asymmetries rooted in power and history.

More transformative possibilities emerge from Indigenous, decolonial, and pluriversal frameworks that reject the anthropocentric, extractive assumptions underpinning much of Western tourism thought. In Aotearoa (New Zealand), Māori values such as whakapapa (genealogical interconnectedness), manaakitanga (reciprocal hospitality), and kaitiakitanga (guardianship of land and ancestors) relocate the source of value from individual gratification to collective care and ecological stewardship (Harmsworth & Awatere, 2013; Pere, 1991). In the Peruvian Andes, the principle of ayni articulates a non-exploitative relational

ethic in which value is generated through cosmological reciprocity among humans, non-humans, and sacred landscapes (Canessa, 2012; de la Cadena, 2015). These ontologies invert dominant assumptions by emphasizing balance, interdependence, and place-based ethics.

Interdisciplinary lenses—including political ecology, feminist political economy, and Indigenous scholarship—show that value is bound up with land, labour, care, and sovereignty, and therefore cannot be inferred from tourist perceptions alone (Robbins, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Watene, 2016). Decentring the tourist is thus an epistemological requirement: valuation must ask what is sustained or sacrificed for others (human and more-than-human) and how value is co-authored and distributed.

3.4. Measuring the Immeasurable? Challenges and Innovations

As tourism scholarship continues to broaden its understanding of value to include emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions, the challenge of how such intangible value might be meaningfully assessed becomes both urgent and conceptually fraught. Traditional evaluative frameworks—such as satisfaction indices, repeat visitation rates, or expenditure tracking—continue to dominate empirical studies, yet these positivist indicators are poorly equipped to capture moral resonance, inner transformation, or the deferred temporality of personal insight (Filep & Laing, 2018; M. K. Smith & Diekmann, 2017). Rooted in a utilitarian and universalizing logic, these metrics often obscure the ambivalence, contradiction, and post-travel reflection that characterize transformative experiences.

This issue is not merely methodological; it is ontological. Transformative value is inherently non-linear and may emerge long after the travel moment has passed, surfacing through moral discomfort, identity re-evaluation, or existential questioning (Lean, 2009; Kirillova et al., 2017). Emotions like guilt, awe, or dislocation are not easily classifiable yet often indicate more profound shifts than generic satisfaction ratings. Nagy-Zekmi (2019) argues that affective complexity is central to tourism meaning-making yet remains largely invisible within standardized tools of measurement.

In response, tourism scholars have increasingly turned to alternative methodologies that prioritize subjectivity, reflexivity, and co-authorship. Positive psychology has offered valuable insights through subjective well-being frameworks that foreground meaning, engagement, and psychological flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Filep et al., 2016). Complementary approaches rooted in interpretive paradigms—such as narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and life-history interviews—enable deeper access to layered emotional and ethical landscapes (Morgan et al., 2015). Participatory evaluation methods, particularly in Indigenous, community-based, and volunteer tourism contexts, challenge externally imposed success criteria by centring locally defined outcomes (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Carr et al., 2016). In Uganda, for instance, storytelling tools developed by NGOs have enabled host communities to articulate transformation in their own epistemic terms (Nakabugo & Tumwine, 2022).

New data sources are expanding how value is studied, from mobile ethnography to biometric or affective measures, but they also raise issues of privacy and the risk of quantifying emotion without cultural or moral context (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Zuboff, 2019). At the policy level, attempts to align tourism evaluation with broader wellbeing and sustainability indicators (e.g., UNWTO's work on SDGs; Bhutan's Gross National Happiness) point to alternatives to growth-only valuation (UNWTO, 2021; Royal Government of Bhutan, 2012).

Interdisciplinary insights call for methodological pluralism. Critical development studies warn that standardized indicators can enact epistemic violence by erasing cultural specificity (Merry, 2011)—for instance, imposing generic wellbeing scales on Indigenous tourism initiatives without community-defined indicators. Environmental humanities and

feminist evaluation further urge multispecies justice and contextual accountability (Heise, 2016; van Dooren et al., 2016; Podems, 2010). Measuring value in transformative tourism therefore requires not only better instruments, but ethical and epistemological humility about who defines value and how.

3.5. Synthesis and Implications: Value as a Moral Terrain in Transformative Tourism

The synthesis below draws together the reviewed value literature and makes explicit this review's interpretive position on valuation as a moral and political terrain in experiential and transformative travel.

The conceptualization of value in tourism has evolved significantly, moving beyond transactional and economic framings to encompass emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions (Hartwell et al., 2018). This shift represents a heightened understanding that tourism is not a simple business transaction; it is, in reality, a moral and socio-cultural pursuit that is driven by emotions, power relations, and situation-based relations. Tourism encounters now engage with questions of meaning, identity, justice, and sustainability, expanding the analytic horizon of what constitutes "value." Figure 4 represents this conceptual evolution as a progression from transactional to systemic understandings. Yet, as this review has demonstrated, such expansion introduces contradictions and tensions that require deeper critical interrogation, particularly regarding who defines value, who benefits from it, and at what cost.

Transformative tourism is often framed as post-consumerist value (self-discovery, worldview shifts), but it can also reproduce neoliberal self-optimization and treat transformation as a purchasable outcome (Wilner et al., 2012; Kunwar & Ulak, 2024). Cultural commodification illustrates the tension: communities may be pressured to perform authenticity for visitor transformation, with risks of distortion and dependency, especially in Global South contexts (Shepherd, 2002; Mbaiwa, 2017).

Interdisciplinary perspectives converge on a common point: value cannot be reduced to tourist satisfaction or market exchange. Environmental humanities and Indigenous scholarship foreground more-than-human relations, land stewardship, and collective well-being (Heise, 2016; van Dooren et al., 2016; Watene, 2016), while feminist ethics and critical tourism studies highlight care, labour, and the political economy of valuation under capitalism and colonial legacies (Tronto, 1993; Ateljevic et al., 2007). Together, these lenses push value research toward accountability and reciprocity rather than performative concern.

Treating value as a moral terrain means recognizing contestation: what counts as "worth" is negotiated within encounters shaped by structural asymmetries. For transformative tourism, the evaluative question shifts from tourist gain to distribution and trade-offs: what is sustained or sacrificed, for whom, and under whose terms. This calls for pluralistic, justice-oriented valuation models that centre diverse epistemologies rather than checklist-style emotion metrics.

Taken together, the reviewed literature shows that "value" in experiential and transformative travel has expanded from transactional metrics to plural valuations that include affect, meaning, ethics, and claims about desirable change. That expansion matters—but it also raises a sharper question: who defines "good" value and legitimate transformation, and through what evidence. In practice, valuation is rarely neutral: it is negotiated through encounters shaped by design promises, institutional narratives, and structural inequalities (Figure 1). As a result, even well-intentioned "transformative" framing can reproduce tourist-centred value and obscure the labour, costs, and constraints experienced by hosts and ecosystems.

Notably, value research in tourism has provided robust tools for linking experience attributes to perceived outcomes, and this review builds on that progress rather than

discarding it. The key shift proposed here, as presented in Figure 1, supports three implications. First, valuation is plural and contested, not a single metric (hedonic, eudaimonic, ethical, political). Second, valuation is distributed, requiring attention to who is centred and who bears costs. Third, valuation claims impose methodological obligations: if value is said to be transformative, research designs must be able to speak to durability and to multi-stakeholder consequences, not only immediate tourist appraisal. With this valuation foundation established, the next section examines the meaning-making mechanisms through which experiences become consequential—narratively, relationally, and across time (Figure 1: Encounter and mechanisms → Meaning-making/valuation).

4. Meaning-Making in Travel Experiences

In Figure 1, meaning-making sits between encounter and impact: it is the interpretive work through which travel episodes are narrated, evaluated, and integrated into everyday life. Building on Section 3 valuation debates, this section synthesizes what the literature identifies as the main meaning-making mechanisms in experiential and transformative travel—especially narrative construction, immersion, disruption, and reflection—and shows how these mechanisms are shaped by discourse, mediation, and power. The core argument is that meaning is not a private psychological residue of travel; it is a relational, situated process that can reproduce dominant imaginaries or open space for more accountable forms of transformation.

4.1. Tourism as a Site of Narrative Construction

Tourism is not merely the act of traversing space; it is a narrative practice through which travellers make sense of themselves and the world. Travel stories—whether shared through conversation, social media, journals, or photography—serve as powerful tools for identity construction, biographical coherence, and social positioning (Bruner, 2005; Mura & Sharif, 2017; White & White, 2004). These stories often retrospectively frame the travel experience as a pivotal moment of self-realization, moral awakening, or transformation (Noy, 2004; Lean et al., 2014). However, the act of storytelling in tourism is neither neutral nor autonomous. It is a culturally situated, technologically mediated, and politically charged process.

Travel narratives are shaped by pre-existing discourses and digital infrastructures. Guidebooks, platform algorithms, and aspirational branding cue travellers toward familiar tropes ("authenticity," "adventure," "spiritual journey"), while social media often rewards emotionally resonant but ideologically safe stories that fit therapeutic self-optimization (Urry & Larsen, 2011; van Nuenen, 2019; Lind & Kristensson Uggla, 2018; Simeli et al., 2025). As a result, "transformation" can become a branded narrative form—curated, legible, and commodified. Volunteer tourism provides a clear case: blogs and images often centre the traveller's growth while local communities appear as moral scenery, which can reproduce colonial narrative authority even when framed as ethical reflection (Sin, 2010; Hollinshead, 2007).

Across studies of travel storytelling, a consistent finding is that narratives are not simple "expressions of inner change"; they are shaped by what is culturally and technologically narratable, and by whose voices are amplified or sidelined (Bamberg, 2004; Somers, 1994). This means transformative tourism research must treat narrative as world-making rather than only self-report: it should examine how stories circulate, whose experiences become authoritative, and how hosts' accounts are engaged without being appropriated.

In transformative tourism research, this calls for a shift in focus—from narrative as self-expression to narrative as world-making. Researchers must interrogate the conditions under which particular stories are produced, circulated, and legitimized, and examine how these

narratives contribute to—or challenge—dominant tourism imaginaries. Attention must also be paid to how host communities narrate their own experiences and how these accounts can be centred rather than appropriated or sidelined (Tamboukou, 2018). Ultimately, storytelling in tourism is not just a method of meaning-making but a moral and political act. Future research must engage with narrative ethics, asking not only what stories are told but whose lives they affirm, whose labour they obscure, and what worlds they help to build or dismantle.

4.2. The Role of Immersion, Disruption and Reflection

Transformative tourism is often described as a journey of inner change, with immersion, disruption, and reflection widely accepted as its core processes. While these elements are celebrated for their potential to catalyze personal growth and perspective shifts, a more critical reading reveals that they are deeply entangled with questions of power, ethics, and epistemology. Understanding how these processes operate within wider socio-political and ecological systems is essential to moving beyond celebratory accounts of transformation.

Immersion, typically framed as deep engagement with people and place, is associated with heightened states of awareness and psychological flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), mindful presence (Dias et al., 2024), and existential authenticity (N. Wang, 1999). Yet this ideal often can obscure the asymmetrical power dynamics that underlie tourist–host interactions. For Global North travellers, immersive experiences are often carefully mediated and commodified, while for hosts, they may entail unacknowledged emotional labour, disruptions of space, and cultural extraction (Cole & Morgan, 2010). The tourist's desire to "experience the real" can reinforce symbolic domination when immersive access is unidirectional and unaccountable (Onosu, 2021). As Freire (1978) argued in a different context, dialogue without mutuality risks becoming an act of symbolic violence disguised as empathy.

Disruption is similarly complex. Often romanticized in transformative tourism literature as a necessary moment of friction or existential discomfort that leads to growth (Kirillova et al., 2017), disruption may also reproduce trauma or inequality—particularly when experienced by or enacted upon marginalized communities. Critical scholarship warns against valorising discomfort without recognizing who absorbs its costs (Mostafanezhad, 2013; S. L. Wearing, 2003). Moreover, the educational framing of disruption—especially in volunteer and development tourism—can reinscribe colonial narratives by casting host communities as vehicles for tourist enlightenment (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023). As Magrizos et al. (2020) contend, disruption must be situated within histories of global mobility, privilege, and symbolic appropriation to understand its ethical weight.

Reflection is often positioned as the bridge between experience and transformation. Practices such as journaling, debriefing, and group dialogue are central to structured tourism programmes that claim developmental value (Reisinger, 2013; Filep & Laing, 2018). However, uncritically implemented reflection risks becoming a ritual of self-congratulation or therapeutic consumption (Godovykh, 2024). Reflection, if divorced from critical facilitation and social context, may reinforce neoliberal individualism rather than challenge it. Moreover, the dominant focus on individual reflection overlooks collective or community-based meaning-making practices, particularly in non-Western epistemologies that centre interdependence, spirituality, and relational knowledge (Watene, 2016).

Interdisciplinary frameworks enrich and complicate this analysis. Transformative learning theory emphasizes that perspective change emerges through dialogic tension and critical questioning, not merely self-awareness (Hobson & Welbourne, 1998). Feminist ethics introduce the concept of situated care, highlighting the emotional labour and affective economies that shape immersive encounters (Hemmings, 2012; Hamington, 2004). Postcolonial theory demands attention to how tourism replicates historical structures of in-

equality and renders certain bodies and cultures as pedagogical tools (Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994). Environmental humanities extend this line of inquiry to embrace non-human actors, urging a rethinking of immersion and transformation through ecological co-dependencies and planetary ethics (Heise, 2016; D. B. Rose & van Dooren, 2011).

To advance a more just and reflexive vision of transformative tourism, research must treat immersion, disruption, and reflection not simply as psychological mechanisms but as relational practices shaped by power, privilege, and historical context. Future studies should interrogate the institutional and material conditions that make such experiences possible and examine their long-term effects on both tourists and host communities. This requires rejecting simplistic narratives of personal development in favour of critical, pluralistic, and ecologically attuned models of transformation that align with broader struggles for social and environmental justice.

4.3. Beyond the Tourist: Collective and Non-Human Meaning

Meaning-making is often treated as an individual, cognitive process centred on the tourist's narrative (Franklin & Crang, 2001). Yet this can reproduce anthropocentric and Eurocentric assumptions about agency and value. Recent work instead frames meaning as relational and more-than-human: co-produced through networks of people, place, and ecosystems embedded in political and ecological systems (Winter, 2009; van Dooren et al., 2016).

Indigenous epistemologies offer critical alternatives to these dominant frameworks. In Māori tourism, for instance, meaning is not a product of consumption or individual reflection but emerges from reciprocal relationships with *whenua* (land), *whakapapa* (genealogy), and *manaakitanga* (care and hospitality), rooted in kinship-based ontologies and responsibilities to land and ancestors (Nandasena et al., 2022). Similarly, Sámi reindeer tourism in Norway positions animals, weather systems, and terrain not as passive scenery but as sentient participants whose agency shapes visitor movement, interpretation, and even safety (Viken & Müller, 2017; Kauppila et al., 2009). These examples decentre the tourist and challenge extractive paradigms by emphasizing multispecies entanglement and collective meaning-making grounded in place-based ethics (Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013).

Post-humanist and decolonial perspectives further destabilize the idea that tourism meaning resides solely in human interpretation. These frameworks argue that meaning is emergent, distributed, and often eludes linguistic articulation, unfolding through affective, material, and ecological relations (Braidotti, 2013; Gómez-Barris, 2017). In Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico, for example, tourism is reconfigured not as a cultural display but as a vehicle for political sovereignty, where meaning arises through resistance, refusal, and relational autonomy (Maldonado-Villalpando et al., 2022; Sundberg, 2014). Rather than centring tourist gratification, these models foreground the authority of societies to dominate the terms of interaction and narrative.

Environmental humanities and political ecology deepen this critique by foregrounding the agency of landscapes, ecosystems, and non-human beings in shaping experience and meaning (Haraway, 2016; D. B. Rose & van Dooren, 2011). They call for a reimagining of tourism as an ecological act, where meaning emerges from interdependence, vulnerability, and multispecies justice (Neimanis, 2019; A. Tsing et al., 2017). Such perspectives not only challenge anthropocentrism but also align with decolonial and feminist calls for more accountable, situated ways of knowing and relating (Todd, 2016). This interdisciplinary lens invites tourism scholars to consider how value is shaped not just through human interpretation, but through complex assemblages involving land, animals, weather, infrastructure, and memory; studies can move toward more holistic and ethical frameworks (Fletcher et al., 2019).

Expanding the locus of meaning beyond the tourist enables a more critical understanding of tourism's ontological politics—raising fundamental questions about whose worldviews are legitimized, whose are marginalized, and how these dynamics structure the possibilities of meaning-making (Hollinshead, 2007; Pritchard et al., 2011). Future research must attend to these epistemic asymmetries and explore methodologies that centre alternative ontologies, relational ethics, and more-than-human forms of co-authorship in tourism encounters.

4.4. Synthesis and Implications: Meaning as a Lived, Layered and Located Process

The synthesis below moves from the preceding literature to this review's integrative interpretation of meaning-making as situated, mediated, and politically consequential.

Meaning is not a universal emotional endpoint; it is situated and relational, produced through place, time, and power. Transformative tourism research has often framed meaning as an individual, introspective journey centred on the tourist (Reisinger, 2013; Kirillova et al., 2017). Yet meaning-making is also shaped by representation, colonial residues (lingering colonial ways of seeing and valuing), and neoliberal narratives of self-optimization. For example, heritage or volunteer tourism can script visitor "awakening" while positioning hosts as timeless, grateful, or mute, narrowing what counts as meaningful change (Khan et al., 2023).

Touristic meaning can be produced at others' expense: trauma commodification in dark tourism, poverty esthetics in slum tours, or sacred-site appropriation in "spiritual" itineraries (K. Simpson, 2004; Lind & Kristensson Uggla, 2018). Narrative authority is also unequal; race, class, language, and mobility shape whose meanings circulate and become legitimate, while host epistemologies are often marginalized or instrumentalized (Hall & Tucker, 2004). These dynamics demand that meaning-making research asks not only what tourists feel, but who bears the costs and who gets to define "good change".

Interdisciplinary frameworks help operationalize these concerns. Transformative learning emphasizes critical reflection and dialogic tension as conditions for durable change (Mezirow, 2000; Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022), while feminist, postcolonial, and environmental humanities perspectives foreground affective labour, epistemological hierarchy, and more-than-human agency (Lugones, 2010; Said, 1978; Haraway, 2016).

Research on narrative and meaning-making has been especially productive for showing how experiences become memorable and personally significant. The key shift proposed here, as presented in Figure 1, refines two points. First, meaning-making is mediated and patterned (by platforms, scripts, branding, and inherited imaginaries), so transformation narratives cannot be treated as unfiltered evidence. Second, meaning-making is relational and distributive: it can generate insight for tourists while extracting labour, voice, or symbolic authority from others. These insights lead directly to the next section, which asks what follows when meaning-making is stabilized into "impact": how impacts are distributed across stakeholders, how durable they are, and how they feed back into design and structural conditions (Figure 1: Outcomes/impacts over time + feedback loops).

5. Assessing Impact

In Figure 1, impacts are the point where valuation and meaning-making become consequential: they appear as changes in people's lives, in host/community conditions, in ecosystems, and in institutional/market practices. This section synthesizes how experiential and transformative travel research frames impact across these domains and highlights two recurring problems: (i) impacts are often assumed to be positive and tourist-centred, and (ii) impact claims are frequently made without evidence capable of assessing durability,

distribution, or unintended harm. The section therefore reframes impact not as a single outcome but as a multi-sited process that must be evaluated across stakeholders and time.

5.1. Personal Impact: Growth, Change and Complexity

Transformative tourism scholarship frequently emphasizes personal growth as its central claim—suggesting that travel enhances self-awareness, ethical sensitivity, or intercultural empathy (Reisinger, 2013; Kirillova et al., 2017). This framing draws heavily on humanistic psychology and eudaimonic well-being models, where fulfilment arises from purpose, reflection, and meaningful challenge rather than hedonic pleasure (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Filep et al., 2016). Travel, in this light, is framed as a pathway to self-actualization, punctuated by emotional resonance and moral awakening.

However, these models often rely on a universalized subject—autonomous, rational, and introspective—embedded in Western liberal thought. This view can obscure alternative epistemologies in which transformation is relational and situated within cosmologies of kinship, land, and collective obligation (Nandasena et al., 2022; Swanson & le Roux, 2016). In some indigenous contexts, for instance, change is not located within the isolated self but emerges through strengthened responsibilities to collective well-being and ancestral ties (Wilson, 2008). Feminist standpoint theory similarly challenges the neutrality of the self, emphasizing that growth is frequently embodied, located, and politically charged (Harding, 2013). Moreover, the affective terrain of transformation is rarely linear or uniformly affirmative. Feelings of disorientation, guilt, and moral discomfort often accompany encounters with systemic inequality, unfamiliar worldviews, or perceived complicity in injustice (Lean, 2009; Sin, 2010; Pashby et al., 2020). These emotional tensions are not signs of failure, but signals of ethical rupture—moments that invite longer-term moral reflection and transformation through discomfort rather than clarity (Andreotti, 2016).

Yet the tourism industry frequently flattens these complexities, commodifying transformation into a marketable promise—"life-changing" experiences packaged for emotional gratification and narrative simplicity (Wolf et al., 2017). This neoliberal rendering instrumentalizes introspection while masking the structural asymmetries and cultural labour underpinning these experiences (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023). It risks turning introspection into spectacle and moral engagement into a consumable event.

Industry narratives often simplify these complexities into marketable "life-changing" promises; Section 7 returns to this commodification dynamic and its implications for accountability and governance (Wolf et al., 2017; Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023).

To move beyond this reductionism, tourism research must critically interrogate how personal impact is constructed, constrained, and circulated. Interdisciplinary insights from critical pedagogy highlight that transformation occurs through dialogic tension, not passive absorption (Freire, 1978). Feminist ethics foreground affective labour and care relations, often overlooked in commodified models of growth (Lugones, 2010). Postcolonial theory exposes how "growth" narratives can reinscribe global hierarchies by positioning host communities as moral scenery for Western development (Bhambra, 2014; Said, 1978). Recognizing transformation as contingent, relational, and ethically ambivalent acknowledges a pluralistic and socially attuned study of change in tourism—one that resists idealization in favour of critical depth.

5.2. Cultural and Social Impact: Exchange or Extraction?

Transformative and experiential tourism are often promoted as pathways to intercultural understanding, mutual respect, and ethical connection. Experiences such as homestays, cultural immersions, and Indigenous-led tours are framed as platforms for dialogue and shared humanity (Dolezal, 2011; Carr et al., 2016). When grounded in long-

term collaboration and community governance, such initiatives can foster solidarity and empowerment (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Velu & Anuradha, 2024), especially when aligned with goals of cultural revitalization and self-determination (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010). Yet, normative framing of "exchange" often masks asymmetrical power relations embedded in global tourism structures.

Tourist–host interactions are frequently shaped by enduring legacies of colonialism, neoliberal development logics, and racialized mobility regimes (Cole, 2007; Sheller, 2018). Hosts—particularly Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized groups—are expected to perform sanitized versions of culture that cater to external imaginaries, while suppressing dissent, historical trauma, or cultural complexity (Hollinshead, 2007; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). This performativity entails affective and emotional labour that remains largely invisible, feminized, and uncompensated (Dashper, 2020; S. L. Wearing, 2003).

Moreover, the transformative outcomes prized by tourists—ethical awakening, intercultural empathy, personal growth—may conflict with community priorities centred on sovereignty, reparative justice, or material redistribution (Larsen & Urry, 2011; Luong, 2024). In such cases, transformation becomes unidirectional, facilitating self-realization for visitors while reinforcing symbolic appropriation or what some term "affective colonialism" (Bunten, 2010; Pritchard & Morgan, 2007). These dynamics reflect a broader pattern in which emotional gratification is secured at the expense of cultural labour and epistemic agency.

To move beyond the rhetoric of ethical encounter, social impact assessment must engage interdisciplinary critiques (McCabe, 2020). Participatory action research, decolonial methodology, and relational ethics are essential to centring host perspectives and evaluating whose values and narratives are legitimized (Cave & Dredge, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021). Without such tools, "cultural exchange" risks becoming a moral alibi that conceals exploitation beneath the language of mutuality and transformation.

5.3. Environmental Impact: Stewardship or Greenwashing?

Transformative and experiential tourism is frequently framed as environmentally responsible, positioned as a conduit for cultivating ecological consciousness and emotional connection to the natural world. Counties like Costa Rica, New Zealand, and Bhutan promote wellbeing, nature-based, and slow tourism as emblematic of "eco-awareness" and sustainability-oriented transformation (Ballantyne et al., 2011; UNWTO, 2019). Activities like forest bathing, wildlife tracking, and permaculture workshops are often valorised as nurturing pro-environmental attitudes, casting tourists as both stewards and beneficiaries of nature's wisdom.

Yet the actual depth and longevity of these claims demand critical interrogation. Studies indicate that experiential awareness does not consistently translate into sustained behavioural change (Decrop & Del Chiappa, 2024) or measurable reductions in ecological footprints (Becken, 2007; Powell & Ham, 2008). Tourists may express concern for the environment while continuing to engage in high-emission travel and resource-intensive consumption patterns (Gössling & Peeters, 2015). The contradiction of flying long-haul to access "sustainable" resorts exemplifies how affective sustainability is increasingly commodified (Fletcher et al., 2019), contributing to what scholars identify as performative or affective greenwashing (Becken, 2019).

At the same time, environmental stewardship within tourism often reinforces exclusionary and colonial models of conservation. Political ecology critiques expose how ecotourism in regions like Tanzania and Nepal has displaced Indigenous communities under conservation regimes that privilege Western environmental esthetics over local livelihoods (Brockington et al., 2008; Nepal, 2000). These models frequently deny local

epistemologies and land rights, perpetuating a tourism logic where nature is curated for external consumption, often under the guise of protection.

Interdisciplinary interventions illuminate the need for a deeper recalibration. Environmental humanities foreground more-than-human relationality and multispecies justice, encouraging models that decentre human exceptionalism in favour of ecological reciprocity (Haraway, 2016; Neimanis, 2019; A. L. Tsing, 2021). Decolonial environmental thought critiques technocratic "sustainability" metrics, calling for reparative ecological governance and epistemic justice rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and sovereignty (K. P. Whyte, 2018; Todd, 2016; Marco-Gardoqui et al., 2024). Transformative tourism, from this standpoint, cannot rely on symbolic connection to nature alone; it must reckon with the structural inequities embedded in global tourism infrastructures. To achieve genuinely transformative impact, tourism must shift from symbolic stewardship to regenerative justice. This means redistributing power and resources toward frontline communities, decentring Western ecological imaginaries, and embedding environmental ethics within systems of governance and accountability. Only by aligning ecological transformation with social and political equity can transformative tourism claim to be truly sustainable.

5.4. Synthesis and Implications: Impact as a Multi-Sited, Contested Process

The synthesis below consolidates the reviewed impact claims and articulates the review's position that "impact" must be treated as multi-sited, distributive, and method-dependent across stakeholders and time.

Impacts of experiential and transformative travel are multi-dimensional, uneven, and sometimes contradictory, unfolding across temporalities and stakeholders rather than within the tourist alone (Frenzel & Koens, 2012). Yet tourism discourse often treats impact as a discrete, affirmative outcome captured by satisfaction or behavioural intention metrics, which obscures power, labour, and distribution (Dias et al., 2024). A more adequate account treats impact as co-constituted: produced through entanglements of bodies, discourses, infrastructures, and institutions, and mediated by epistemologies that decide whose outcomes count and which transformations become visible (Figure 5; Ateljevic, 2009; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

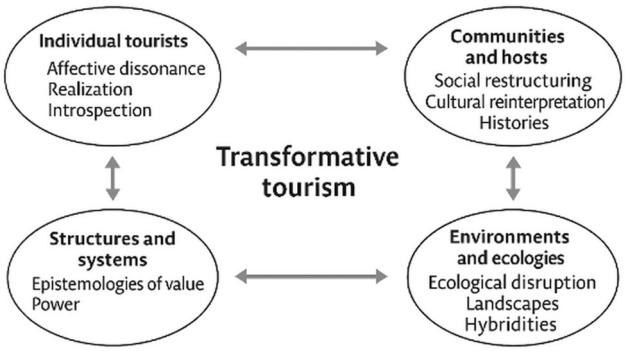


Figure 5. Multidimensional and contested nature of impact in transformative tourism.

Reframing impact demands moving from extractive evaluation toward participatory and justice-oriented approaches, including longitudinal and co-produced designs that can surface contestation and resistance. Feminist, political ecological, decolonial, and Indigenous methodologies help unsettle linear progress narratives and cultivate epistemic plurality (K. Whyte, 2020; Sundberg, 2014). Impact should therefore be treated as dynamic and negotiated—asking what changes, for whom, and who bears the costs (Figure 5).

This figure illustrates how impact in transformative tourism emerges from dynamic interactions among four interrelated domains: individual tourists, host communities, environments and ecologies, and broader structures and systems. Rather than a linear or

isolated outcome, impact is co-produced through affective, social, ecological, and institutional processes shaped by power, positionality, and epistemologies of value. The model highlights that impact is not a singular result but a contested narrative negotiated in multiple spatial and temporal settings.

Across the reviewed literature, impact emerges as multi-dimensional, uneven, and sometimes contradictory. Personal change can be partial, reversible, or ambivalent; social and cultural "exchange" can slide into extraction when voice and benefits remain asymmetrically distributed; and environmental stewardship claims can be undermined by high-emission mobility and by conservation regimes that displace local livelihoods. The recurring gap is therefore not simply "insufficient measurement," but mis-specified evaluation: many studies operationalize impact narrowly (tourist satisfaction, intention, short-term self-report) even when the claims being made are systemic, ethical, or long-term.

Impact scholarship has been crucial for expanding tourism's evaluative imagination beyond visitor satisfaction. The next step, as presented in Figure 1 and reviewed in the literature, supports two refinements. First, impacts should be treated as distributed outcomes across tourists, hosts/communities, environments, and institutions/markets, not as a tourist-only endpoint. Second, impacts generate feedback loops: what is celebrated as "transformative" becomes absorbed into design scripts, marketing promises, governance priorities, and infrastructural development, reshaping the very conditions that enable future encounters. These implications motivate the methodological section that follows: if impacts are distributed and durable, then methods must be selected to match those claims (Figure 1: Evidence & methods bar).

6. Methodological Approaches

The integrative framework (Figure 1) makes a simple point with major methodological consequences: the stronger the claim (e.g., durable transformation; multi-stakeholder impact; systemic change), the stronger the evidence required. This section therefore reviews methods used in experiential and transformative travel research as method–claim alignments: what kinds of methods are being used (Figure 6), what kinds of claims they can credibly support (or not), and how methodological choices shape what becomes visible as "transformation." The section emphasizes that methodological innovation is necessary but insufficient without attention to epistemic justice—whose voices count as evidence, whose outcomes are evaluated, and who controls interpretation.

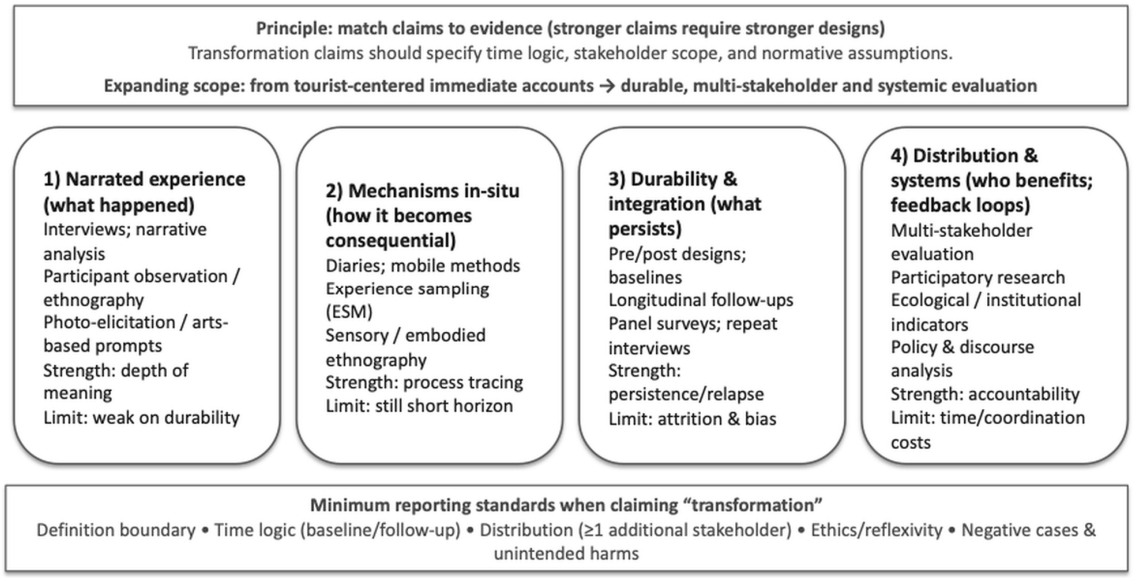


Figure 6. Methodological approaches to studying transformative tourism.

6.1. Qualitative Dominance: Narratives, Interviews, and Reflexivity

The growth of experiential and transformative tourism has been primarily examined through qualitative methodologies—ranging from narrative interviews and ethnographies to reflective journaling and autoethnography (Reisinger, 2013; Kirillova et al., 2017). These methods have illuminated the affective and ethical contours of travel, revealing how individuals construct meaning and negotiate identity through embodied and introspective engagement. Yet, the centrality of personal narrative as both data and evidence raises urgent epistemological and ethical questions about whose experiences are validated and how transformation is defined.

Much of the literature draws disproportionately on Western, mobile, and educated tourists—subjects already fluent in self-reflection and narrative coherence (Lean, 2009; Rickly, 2016). This emphasis risks reinforcing a liberal-humanist ideal of the autonomous, self-optimizing subject whose transformation aligns with neoliberal tropes of productivity, resilience, and inner growth (Hollinshead, 2004). In doing so, it marginalizes collective, affective, and non-verbal forms of meaning-making that are central to Indigenous and Global South knowledge traditions (Swanson & le Roux, 2016; Chambers, 2007; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). These erasures reproduce hierarchies of epistemic legitimacy in tourism research, favouring introspective speech over relational silence, and narrative clarity over experiential ambiguity. Moreover, qualitative data is often interpreted as an unmediated reflection of "authentic" experience. Yet as Riessman (2008) reminds us, narratives are performative and culturally scripted—they are shaped by what is narratable, acceptable, and intelligible within prevailing social discourses. Transformation stories often conform to familiar redemptive arcs, occluding discomfort, contradiction, or failure (Caruana et al., 2014). Without a critical interrogation of these narrative structures, research risks romanticizing transformation as a predictable and linear process.

Reflexive and autoethnographic approaches offer promise but also carry risks. While they open space for embodied inquiry and transparency, they may unintentionally re-centre privileged voices if not embedded in intersectional and decolonial frameworks (Mostafanezhad, 2014; Abu-Lughod, 1991). Researchers must attend not only to what is shared but to what remains unsaid—recognizing the political and affective labour of speaking, withholding, or conforming in research encounters (Gill, 2016; Schurr & Segebart, 2012). To advance transformative tourism research, qualitative methodologies must go beyond documenting experience (Brown, 2009) to interrogating how narrative, power, and positionality structure what transformation looks like, for whom, and why. This requires integrating epistemological plurality, embracing discomfort, and committing to more just forms of knowledge production.

6.2. Emerging Tools: Mixed Methods, Mobile Ethnography and Digital Traces

In response to long-standing critiques of qualitative dominance in transformative tourism research, scholars are adopting hybrid and emergent methodologies that expand epistemological breadth and methodological rigour. Mixed-methods designs—incorporating interviews, psychometric tools, geospatial tracking, and biometric feedback—offer a layered analytic lens on the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural extents of tourist transformation (Pearce & Packer, 2013). These designs better reflect the fragmented temporality and multisided nature of transformation, where insight may emerge gradually or be shaped by post-travel reflection, digital mediation, or social reinforcement (Christou et al., 2025b; Lariza Corral-Gonzalez et al., 2023).

Mobile ethnography exemplifies this shift toward contextually embedded methods. Through GPS-enabled photo diaries, audio logs, and app-based journaling, travellers document lived experience in real time, capturing affective responses to place, encounter,

and ambiguity (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Mkono, 2020). This allows researchers to apprehend transformation as it unfolds—embodied, situated, and often non-linear. Yet, such immediacy must be balanced with critical awareness of infrastructural inequities: digital access, data privacy, and cultural comfort with self-documentation vary widely, particularly among marginalized or digitally precarious groups (Pink et al., 2018).

Digital traces—such as Instagram posts, blogs, and travel reviews—further illuminate how tourists narrate, aestheticize, and perform transformation in semi-public arenas (Hunter, 2021; Gretzel & Koo, 2021; Michael et al., 2025). Computational analyses, including sentiment mining and image pattern recognition, can reveal discursive tropes and affective intensities at scale (Csapó & Kusumaningrum, 2025). This shift is mirrored in destination-branding scholarship, where evidence syntheses show how social, mobile, and AI-mediated channels have become central to branding processes and visibility metrics (Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2025). However, digital expression is deeply shaped by platform logics, social surveillance, and aspirational self-branding (Baka, 2015; Higham et al., 2019). As such, these narratives may reflect not spontaneous insight, but algorithmically incentivized visibility—complicating claims to authenticity or spontaneity in digital transformation stories and raising questions about digital labour, exclusion, and the commodification of experience.

These methodological shifts require more than technical dexterity; they demand epistemological and ethical reflexivity. Researchers must interrogate who is visible in datasets, whose voices are omitted, and how power circulates through seemingly "neutral" tools. Interdisciplinary engagements with critical data studies, feminist digital ethics, and media anthropology provide robust frameworks for decoding how digital infrastructures shape what counts as knowledge and transformation (Lupton, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). If used reflexively, emerging methods can do more than document experience—they can unsettle dominant paradigms, foreground plural knowledges, and foster more equitable approaches to studying impact in transformative tourism. If a study claims "transformative" outcomes, designs should specify (i) time (when change is assessed and whether it persists), (ii) comparison (baseline, counterfactual, or at least pre/post logic), and (iii) distribution (whose outcomes are assessed beyond the tourist). Without these elements, studies can still describe meaningful experiences, but they should avoid causal or durability claims.

6.3. Participatory and Decolonial Approaches

An expanding body of tourism research critiques extractive epistemologies by advancing participatory and decolonial methodologies. These approaches do not merely adjust research techniques; they fundamentally reconfigure epistemic authority by asking who defines knowledge, whose interests are prioritized, and how tourism scholarship is entangled with broader systems of power and dispossession (Jamal & Higham, 2021; Nandasena et al., 2022; L. T. Smith, 2021). Within the transformative tourism context, such frameworks underscore the need for relational accountability, situated ethics, and sovereignty over representation.

Participatory research actively involves host communities not as subjects but as epistemic agents—shaping research agendas, co-designing methods, and interpreting outcomes. Approaches such as photovoice, community mapping, storytelling circles, and co-authored texts support dialogic knowledge production and foster shared ownership over meaning-making (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Carr et al., 2016; Shrestha et al., 2025). These techniques serve not only to deepen contextual understanding but to redistribute decision-making power and embed reciprocity into the research process (Kindon et al., 2007). They also

align with calls from transformative tourism literature to centre affective and ethical entanglements over disembodied metrics of change (Pung et al., 2020).

Decolonial methodologies go further by interrogating the ontological assumptions of tourism research itself. Rather than viewing transformation as linear, individualistic progress, they foreground relational, place-based, and often intergenerational forms of change rooted in Indigenous and subaltern worldviews (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Gómez-Barris, 2017; Kuokkanen, 2011). These perspectives challenge Western developmental logics (Maldonado-Villalpando et al., 2022) and emphasize continuity, ancestral presence, and reciprocal obligation as legitimate—and often preferred—modes of transformation (Andreotti et al., 2015). Accordingly, transformative tourism impact must be evaluated not only by material or affective outcomes, but by how it aligns with or violates the relational ethics and cosmologies of those most affected.

However, operationalizing these approaches is fraught with institutional and structural constraints. Participatory and decolonial research often clashes with conventional academic imperatives, including rigid ethical protocols, authorship norms, and performance metrics that privilege speed and individual output over collective process and trust-building (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Chilisa, 2020). Moreover, the burden of participation frequently falls unevenly on marginalized communities, raising questions about whose labour sustains "inclusive" methodologies (Datta, 2018). Transformative tourism research that claims ethical intent must reckon with these tensions—not by instrumentalizing community engagement, but by reimagining knowledge production as a collaborative and contested process. Ultimately, participatory and decolonial approaches are not mere methodological options; they constitute ethical and epistemological commitments. They call for an unsettling of academic comfort, a redistribution of research benefits, and a collective rethinking of tourism scholarship's role in advancing justice, sovereignty, and plural ways of knowing.

6.4. Synthesis and Implications: Toward Methodological Pluralism and Justice

The synthesis below translates the reviewed methodological patterns into a clear implication: ambitious transformative claims require justice-aware designs capable of assessing durability and distribution.

Reconceptualizing the study of experiential and transformative tourism requires more than methodological diversification—it demands a reorientation of epistemological ethics and research purpose (López-González, 2018). Dominant approaches often centre the tourist's introspective journey while sidestepping the socio-political infrastructures and colonial inheritances that condition whose stories are told, legitimized, or silenced (Hollinshead, 2004). While methods such as interviews, reflective journals, and autoethnography illuminate subjective change, they risk reproducing hegemonic paradigms when decoupled from structural critique and positional reflexivity (Hann & Hart, 2011). Methodological pluralism must therefore exceed the pragmatic logic of triangulation. It must embrace ontological multiplicity and interrogate what counts as knowledge, how it circulates, and in whose interest it operates. This includes engaging Indigenous, feminist, post-humanist, and Global South methodologies that articulate transformation not as rupture or revelation, but as relational continuity, ecological reciprocity, and ancestral accountability (Chilisa, 2020; Todd, 2016; de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018). Methodological justice entails valuing non-textual and non-linear forms—storytelling, ritual, silence, refusal, and embodied knowing—as epistemically valid, especially within communities historically marginalized by extractive tourism scholarship (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

A justice-centred methodological stance must also address the institutional and ontological asymmetries embedded in knowledge production. Participatory and decolonial designs call for research that is not only co-produced but co-owned—shaped by com-

munities whose lived realities and epistemologies challenge dominant modes of inquiry (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021). This includes resisting academic extractivism by building long-term relational accountability, practicing ethical slowdown, and redistributing authorship, credit, and resources (Jazeel, 2019; Gill, 2016). Rather than treating transformation as an objectively measurable endpoint, researchers should trace how it is co-constituted, deferred, or contested across positionalities, places, and temporalities (Escobar, 2008; Canteiro et al., 2018). Interdisciplinary insights from critical pedagogy, political ecology, Black geographies, and arts-based research provide rich frameworks for decentring Eurocentric epistemologies and fostering methodological humility (Hooks, 1996; Hawthorne, 2019; Leavy, 2020).

Methodological pluralism is a strength of this literature: qualitative work has illuminated lived experience, and quantitative approaches have enabled scale and comparison. However, methodology in transformative tourism must be reframed as a mode of ethical and political engagement. It is not just about crafting rigorous techniques but about co-imagining research as a reparative and relational act. When grounded in pluralistic values and a commitment to justice, methodological practice becomes not simply a way to study transformation—but a way to practice it. For Figure 1, the methodological implication is straightforward: claims must follow designs. Studies that argue for transformative tourism should show how change is assessed over time, how host/community/environmental consequences are incorporated, and how normative assumptions about "good change" are made explicit rather than smuggled into instruments. This alignment becomes especially urgent when "transformation" moves from scholarship into branding and service design. The next section therefore examines the industry uptake of transformative discourse and the ethical tensions that arise when change is sold as a product (Figure 1: Provider/place design and discourse + feedback loops).

To increase cumulative knowledge and avoid over-claiming, Table 3 summarizes minimum reporting standards and evidence thresholds aligned to the strength of the claim: (i) experiential claims, (ii) transformative claims, and (iii) multi-stakeholder impact claims.

Table 3. Minimum reporting standards aligned to claim type (experiential, transformative, and multi-stakeholder impact) *.

Claim Type	What the Claim Implies	Minimum Evidence/Design Features	Minimum Reporting Standards (Checklist)
Experiential claim	An in situ experience is memorable/meaningful and produces perceived value for participants.	Clearly specified context and participants; defensible operationalization of "experience" (qualitative and/or quantitative). Cross-sectional designs acceptable when claims remain experiential.	Anchor definition (Tables 1 and 2); describe encounter mechanisms; report sampling/context limits; avoid labelling short-term self-reports as "transformation".
Transformative claim	Change extends beyond the trip and is integrated (at least partly) into everyday life (attitudes, identity, practices, relationships).	Time logic (baseline + follow-up, or credible retrospective design); attention to durability, relapse, and alternative explanations; inclusion of negative/ambivalent cases where possible.	Specify when/how change is assessed; define what counts as "durable" in context; make normative assumptions explicit (what is "good change" and who defines it); use cautious language (e.g., "transformative potential") when evidence is short-term.
Multi-stakeholder impact claim	Tourism produces distributed consequences for tourists, hosts/workers, institutions, and/or environments (including trade-offs).	Data from at least two stakeholder groups and/or relevant ecological/infrastructural indicators; triangulation of outcomes; attention to benefit distribution and harm.	Explicit stakeholder scope; indicators for each group; transparency on data governance and consent; report conflicts/trade-offs (who benefits/loses); avoid inferring community/environment impacts from tourist-only data.

* When minimum evidence cannot be met, downscale the language of the claim rather than treating "transformation" as a synonym for strong emotion or satisfaction.

7. Industry Response and Practitioner Engagement

The discourse of "transformation" has moved well beyond academia. Over the past decade, experiential and transformative travel have become central to tourism branding and service innovation. From luxury eco-retreats to community-based initiatives, the industry has gradually positioned itself as facilitating personal advancement, ethical connection, and life-changing experiences. Industry interest in "transformative" offerings is not inherently cynical; in some cases, it reflects genuine attempts to redesign experiences toward well-being, learning, or responsibility. The concern raised in this review is that marketed transformation can convert ethical aspirations into scripts, metrics, and promises that are difficult to verify and easy to commodify. This section critically examines how industry actors adopt, adapt, and sometimes distort the concept of transformation, highlighting tensions between aspiration and commodification, and between ethics and market logic (Figure 7).

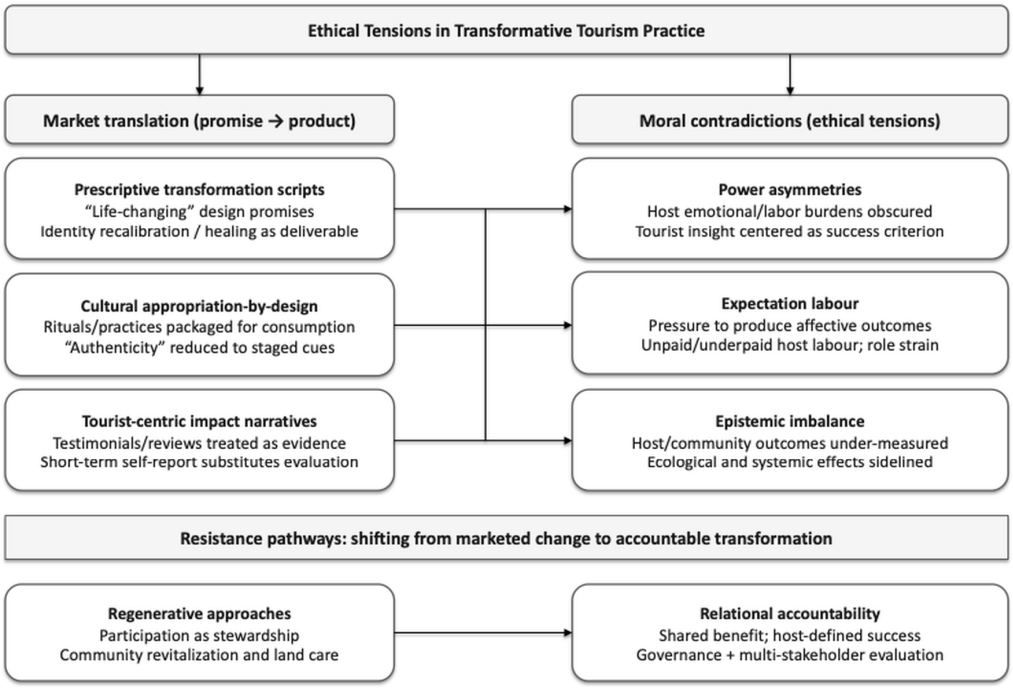


Figure 7. From promise to appropriation: Moral contradictions of marketed transformation in tourism.

This figure critically maps the ethical tensions embedded in the tourism industry's appropriation of "transformation" as a marketable promise. It contrasts industry narratives of life-changing travel with underlying dynamics of commodification, symbolic extraction, and affective labour. The diagram highlights three interrelated domains—design logics, operational practices, and structural conditions—that shape how transformation is produced, performed, and contested. It underscores the need for more accountable, host-centred, and justice-informed approaches that move beyond branding toward shared authorship and situated ethics.

7.1. From Experience Design to Life Design

Industry narratives increasingly frame tourism as not merely experiential but ontologically transformative. Drawing on the reasoning of Pine and Gilmore's (2011) notion of the "experience economy", many providers now promote "life design" travel—positioning themselves as curators of healing, insight, and identity recalibration (Machado et al., 2025). Commercial itineraries incorporate reflective rituals, wellness modalities, and guided introspection, often marketed as gateways to purpose and authenticity. However, this prescrip-

tive framing of transformation risks compressing complex processes into curated emotional arcs and marketable tropes: "find yourself," "reset," or "awaken." Such narratives prioritize affective resonance and brand differentiation over dialogical engagement or emergent meaning-making (Morgan et al., 2015; Rickly, 2016). They often rely on the symbolic labour of hosts and the selective appropriation of cultural practices—reconfiguring sacred or communal rituals into consumable experiences for predominantly Western tourists (Fennell, 2022; Maccarrone-Eaglen, 2009). The transformative ideal is thus shaped by commodification, where introspection is not emergent but orchestrated.

To move beyond symbolic transactions, ethical life design must be rooted in co-authorship, place-based engagement, and long-term reciprocity. Otherwise, transformation becomes a product—emotionally potent but epistemologically shallow.

7.2. The Ethical Tensions of Selling Change

Framing tourism as "transformative" creates a powerful affective promise—but also complex ethical implications. "Life-changing travel" has become a strategic brand identity, yet few providers interrogate how such transformations are produced, who they benefit, and what responsibilities they entail (Sharpley & Stone, 2012). Often, host communities are cast as facilitators of visitor insight while bearing the invisible costs of emotional labour, cultural performance, and infrastructural accommodation. Volunteer tourism illustrates this asymmetry. While tourists may describe moral awakening or deep connection, communities are left managing transient, often underqualified guests (Sin, 2010; Mostafanezhad, 2014). Affective outcomes—such as empathy, gratitude, or mindfulness—are treated as deliverables, produced through often-unpaid cultural labour (S. Wearing & Wearing, 2006). Even in "ethical" or "immersive" formats, transformation is centred on the tourist's emotional journey, rather than on shared benefit or host-defined success (Höckert & Grimwood, 2024).

Moreover, industry evaluation mechanisms rarely capture host perspectives or long-term impact. Testimonials, reviews, and social media posts dominate, reinforcing narratives of transformation as individual achievement rather than as relational or systemic process (Everingham & Motta, 2022; Sihombing et al., 2024).

7.3. Innovation, Resistance and Regenerative Practice

Amid this commodification, segments of the industry are pursuing alternative models rooted in regeneration, relationality, and host-led design. Regenerative tourism frameworks, for instance, move beyond sustainability to focus on community revitalization, ecosystem restoration, and intergenerational well-being (Dredge, 2022; Bellato et al., 2023). These approaches view travel not as consumption, but as participatory stewardship.

Practices include Indigenous storytelling platforms, cooperative-run tour enterprises, and NGO-partnered initiatives focused on mutual learning and host agency (Carr et al., 2016; Mitev et al., 2024). These models align with calls in transformative tourism literature to decentre the tourist gaze and re-embed ethics in practice (Wearing et al., 2017). Yet they face systemic obstacles. Ethical branding is often co-opted by commercial interests, and regenerative discourse risks dilution when not accompanied by redistribution of control and capital (Boluk et al., 2019; Jamal & Higham, 2021). Structural humility remains essential. Practitioners must not only innovate, but actively resist extractive norms—relinquishing narrative authority, rethinking impact metrics, and embedding justice into operations.

7.4. Synthesis and Implications: Between Promise and Practice

The synthesis below draws together the industry-facing discussion and clarifies the review's interpretation of the tension between transformative promise and commodified delivery.

The industry's engagement with transformation reflects a double-edged trend: a sincere desire for meaningful tourism, and a commodified repackaging of change as

affective currency. While many operators articulate values of authenticity, healing, and connection, these are often delivered through emotionally charged but structurally shallow models (Germann Molz, 2012). As a result, "impact" becomes less about structural change and more about personal resonance—easily marketed, rarely interrogated.

The critical challenge lies not in rejecting industry engagement, but in demanding accountability. Transformation must be evaluated not just through traveller testimonials, but through co-created frameworks, host-defined criteria, and long-term perspectives. This requires structural shifts in how success is defined, who defines it, and how value is distributed. Who benefits from transformation? Who bears its emotional and infrastructural costs? Who controls its narrative? These questions are too often avoided in favour of simplified success stories that serve marketing goals but leave ethical complexity unaddressed.

Bridging the gap between promise and practice requires a reorientation of accountability. Transformation must be assessed not just through traveller feedback, but through host-defined criteria, participatory frameworks, and long-term community perspectives. It also means recognizing that not all transformation is positive, not all meaning is marketable, and not all voices are equally audible within tourism's dominant channels. The future of practitioner engagement lies in co-creation with constraint, ethical transparency, and the humility to acknowledge tourism's complicity in broader inequalities. Only then can the industry move from using transformation as a slogan to supporting it as a shared, situated, and justice-informed process.

For practitioners who develop or market "transformative" products, the review implies three immediate design and accountability moves:

1. Be specific about what change is promised (and for whom) and avoid universal "life-changing" claims without evidence.
2. Co-define success criteria with hosts/workers and monitor impacts beyond tourists (including unintended harms and trade-offs).
3. Design for durability (e.g., follow-up, aftercare, and opportunities for reciprocity) rather than only peak moments and narrative closure.

8. Future Directions and Research Agenda

The proliferation of experiential and transformative travel has sparked intellectual enthusiasm, yet it has often drifted into conceptual vagueness and ethical complacency. Despite its radical potential, the field continues to recycle foundational assumptions—valorising personal growth while sidelining structural inequalities, masking commodification with ethical rhetoric, and positioning transformation as an individualized outcome rather than a relational and situated process. The affective language of "becoming" and "awakening" risks aestheticizing privilege rather than interrogating power.

If this body of research is to mature beyond market responsiveness and into a critical domain of scholarly influence, it must now confront its blind spots. The goal of this section is not to catalogue new trends or niche opportunities, but to identify *structural transformations* in the field's priorities, ethics, and epistemologies. What follows is not a roadmap—but a provocation.

To make the agenda easy to navigate, the priorities are grouped into four headline themes (Table 4): (1) political economy and governance of transformation claims; (2) epistemic justice and multi-stakeholder valuation; (3) durability and distributed impact assessment; and (4) practice, design, and accountability in industry adoption.

Table 4. Gap-linked research agenda derived from the integrative framework (Figure 1).

Theme (Headline Priorities)	Priority	Gap Evidenced in the Review	Example Research Questions	Minimum Methods to Support Claims
Political economy & governance	A1 Transformation as political economy	Transformation treated as individual outcome; value capture and labour often hidden.	How do pricing, platforms, land/heritage control, and labour arrangements shape who is positioned as "transformative" and who captures value?	Comparative case studies; business model/value-chain analysis; multi-stakeholder interviews.
Political economy & governance	A2 Positionality and differential capacity for change	"Transformative" assumed universal; privilege and mobility constraints under-specified.	How do race/class/gender/citizenship and mobility regimes shape access, interpretation, and outcomes? Who is excluded from "transformative" products?	Intersectional sampling; reflexive positionality statements; comparative designs across groups/settings.
Political economy & governance	A3 Accountability and governance of transformation claims	Ambitious moral promises outpace accountability mechanisms for harms or broken promises.	Who defines legitimate "good change" (tourists, hosts, firms, states)? What governance tools exist for auditing claims and addressing harm?	Policy/governance analysis; discourse analysis of standards and claims; stakeholder workshops to co-define evaluation criteria.
Epistemic justice & valuation	A4 Host-defined outcomes and counter-narratives	Hosts/communities often appear as context, not evaluators of what "transformation" means.	What counts as "transformative" from host/community perspectives? What forms of change are desired, refused, or experienced as harm?	Participatory or co-authored designs; community-led indicators; explicit benefit-sharing and data governance.
Epistemic justice & valuation	A5 Multi-stakeholder valuation and value conflict	Co-creation rhetoric does not ensure redistribution or resolve value conflict.	Where do tourists' valuations clash with community/ecological valuations? How are conflicts negotiated, and who has authority to arbitrate?	Deliberative or multi-criteria valuation; mixed stakeholder sampling; explicit mapping of whose indicators count.
Epistemic justice & valuation	A6 Epistemic justice in methods and interpretation	Tourists' accounts become the default evidence base; other epistemologies/outcomes are under-specified.	How do research instruments and platform storytelling shape what becomes "sayable" as transformation? Which voices are amplified or muted?	Reflexive method reporting; non-tourist data sources (hosts/workers/ecological indicators); transparent limits of generalization.
Durability & distributed impacts	A7 Durability, integration, and relapse	Short-term post-trip self-report dominates; durability and relapse are rarely assessed.	Which changes persist (e.g., 3/6/12 months later) and why? Which fade or reverse as everyday constraints reassert?	Baseline + follow-ups; diaries/experience sampling; attrition and negative-case reporting.
Durability & distributed impacts	A8 Distributed impact evaluation	Tourist outcomes dominate; community/ecological/institutional outcomes are weak or inferred.	What are convergent/divergent impacts across tourists, hosts/workers, institutions, and environments? How do trade-offs distribute?	Mixed-method evaluation with at least two stakeholder groups; inclusion of ecological/institutional indicators where relevant; triangulation.
Durability & distributed impacts	A9 Ambivalent and negative transformation	"Positive change" is often assumed; harms and ambivalence are under-theorized.	When does "transformation" produce appropriation, guilt without responsibility, or harm framed as growth? How do hosts experience these dynamics?	Critical-incident/negative-case approaches; ethically sensitive protocols; designs that allow refusal and non-closure.
Practice, design & accountability	A10 Auditing transformative claims and consumer-facing promises	Branding outpaces evidence; operators' transformation promises are rarely audited.	What is promised as transformation, what mechanisms are claimed, and what evidence is offered? How do tourists interpret these promises?	Content analysis of marketing/scripts; interviews with operators and frontline workers; consumer research/fieldwork.
Practice, design & accountability	A11 Design-based research and living labs for accountable transformation	Scholar-practitioner links are thin or promotional; design mechanisms are under-tested.	What design features support reciprocity and long-term responsibility (including "aftercare") rather than extraction?	Design-based cycles (co-design → pilot → evaluate → revise); pre/post + follow-up evaluation; host-defined success criteria.
Practice, design & accountability	A12 Discomfort, awe, and ethical learning—conditions and limits	Discomfort is invoked as a mechanism but poorly bounded; risks are under-specified.	Under what conditions does discomfort support learning/responsibility, and when does it produce defensiveness, voyeurism, or harm?	Experience sampling/diaries linked to follow-ups; ethical risk assessment; contextual comparisons.
Practice, design & accountability	A13 Refusing premature closure and building relational continuity	Designs often optimize narrative closure, while durable responsibility requires ongoing relations.	What happens when programmes emphasize ongoing responsibility rather than a "life-changing moment"? How can continuity and reciprocity be supported post-trip?	Longitudinal designs; community feedback loops; evaluation that tracks post-trip practices (not only intentions).

8.1. Re-Politicizing the Transformative Turn

The transformative tourism literature frequently frames change as a predominantly introspective, apolitical, and individualized process, largely centred on personal emotional experiences (Amaro et al., 2023; Orea-Giner, 2025). This psychological orientation overlooks critical socio-political underpinnings, masking how privilege, accessibility, and labour determine who can travel, host, and ultimately, transform (Rastegar, 2025; Kyriakaki et al., 2025). This critique aligns with interdisciplinary scholarship from sociology and geography,

which highlights tourism's embeddedness in racialized mobility regimes and neo-colonial power structures (Sheller & Urry, 2004; Mostafanezhad & Promburom, 2016).

Transformation is inherently political, shaped significantly by uneven capital flows, historical colonialism, and systemic injustices. The self-actualization of Western tourists frequently rests upon obscured dynamics of border violence, ecological degradation, and Indigenous dispossession (Rastegar et al., 2023). The commodification of sacred spaces for personal growth particularly exemplifies these tensions, as such places often bear histories of extraction, displacement, and erasure (Grimwood & Johnson, 2019). Moreover, seemingly benign terms like "connection" and "empathy" require critical scrutiny, as they risk depoliticizing encounters and sustaining soft power hierarchies. Marketed "moments of awakening" often reinforce voyeuristic tendencies, offering tourists emotional gratification without fostering genuine accountability or systemic awareness (Le et al., 2024). Moments of "insight" may reinforce soft hierarchies of moral superiority, in which visitors receive emotional enrichment while hosts remain silenced or instrumentalized (Sin, 2010). In many cases, the transformation being sold is less about justice than about therapeutic consumption.

Re-politicizing transformative tourism necessitates explicit interrogation of embedded power relations, asking critical questions such as: Whose transformation is prioritized, and who remains static to enable this growth? Who gains visibility, and whose experiences remain silenced? (Amaro et al., 2023; Orea-Giner, 2025). Advancing transformative tourism scholarship requires embracing interdisciplinary frameworks, drawing explicitly from critical geography, sociology, and postcolonial studies to emphasize collective, slow, and resistance-oriented transformations that actively contest prevailing neoliberal and colonial logics (Sheller, 2018; Grimwood & Johnson, 2019). Without an anchoring in justice and accountability, transformation risks becoming an illusion—comforting, profitable, and intellectually stagnant. The future of transformative tourism lies in structural critique, interdisciplinary collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to equity.

Gap Evidenced in the Review

A substantial portion of transformative travel research frames change as personal insight, well-being, or self-development while under-specifying the political-economic and historical conditions that shape who can access "transformative" travel, who provides the labour that sustains it, and whose places and stories become raw material for transformation narratives (Sections 3, 5 and 7). This creates a blind spot: transformation can be celebrated as "good" even when it is embedded in extractive mobility regimes, leading to the following research agenda priorities, questions and minimum research methods:

A1. Transformation as political economy.

- *Research questions*: How do pricing, platform visibility, land/heritage control, and labour arrangements shape who is positioned as a "transformative" traveller and who bears costs? When does "transformative" branding intensify commodification pressures, and when can it support redistributive arrangements?
- *Minimum methods*: comparative case studies across destinations/products; analysis of business models and value capture (who earns what); multi-stakeholder interviews (workers, hosts, operators, policymakers), not only tourists.

A2. Positionality and differential capacity for change.

- *Research questions*: How do race/class/gender/citizenship and mobility constraints shape what kinds of "disruption," learning, or responsibility are possible? When do transformation narratives reflect privilege rather than change?

- *Minimum methods*: purposive and intersectional sampling; reflexive positionality statements; designs that compare groups (not necessarily experiments—comparative qualitative panels also work).

A3. Accountability and governance of transformation claims.

- *Research questions*: Who defines legitimate "good change" (tourists, hosts, firms, states)? What accountability mechanisms exist for harms or broken promises?
- *Minimum methods*: policy and governance analysis; document/discourse analysis of standards and claims; stakeholder workshops to co-define legitimate evaluation criteria.

8.2. Decentring the Tourist and Reframing Epistemology

Despite increasing recognition of structural power asymmetries in tourism, transformative tourism scholarship often continues to privilege the tourist as the central agent and interpreter of change (Bowman, 2020; Rastegar et al., 2023). Host communities and environments are typically rendered as passive facilitators—providing raw material for introspection or symbolic authenticity. This is not a simple representational bias, but an enduring epistemic imbalance rooted in colonial systems of knowledge production, where Western travellers narrate transformation while others are positioned as objects of their journeys (Bellato et al., 2023; Chakrabarty, 2009). Mainstream paradigms tend to privilege Euro-American understandings of transformation—as individualist rupture, cathartic awakening, and narrative resolution (Adsit, 2021). These frameworks often exclude alternative epistemologies where transformation may unfold relationally, cyclically, or through non-verbal and spiritual dimensions (L. B. Simpson, 2014; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Such exclusions reproduce the assumption that knowledge must conform to Western logics of coherence, legibility, and personal growth—aligning closely with market ideals of self-optimization (S. Wearing & Wearing, 2006).

Reframing transformation requires more than surface inclusion. It entails an epistemological shift that foregrounds co-produced, community-led knowledge, and decentres the tourist as the sole locus of insight. This demands interdisciplinary engagement with Indigenous methodologies, critical race theory, feminist standpoint epistemologies, and post-humanist approaches that challenge anthropocentric and individualist assumptions (L. T. Smith, 2021; de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018; Haraway, 2016). Silence, refusal, and embodied presence must be recognized as valid modes of knowing, especially in contexts where voice has historically entailed vulnerability or extraction (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Lugones, 2010). Transformative tourism research must thus interrogate its own role in sustaining epistemic dominance. It must move beyond romanticizing tourist journeys toward a more reflexive and just methodology that centres plural cosmologies and knowledge systems. Such an agenda does not merely describe transformation—it participates in it through acts of epistemic humility, redistribution, and sustained relational accountability.

Gap Evidenced in the Review

Even where the literature invokes co-creation, ethics, or community benefit, tourists remain the dominant evaluators and narrators; host/community and more-than-human perspectives are often treated as contextual backdrop rather than co-constitutive outcomes (Sections 3–5). This sustains epistemic asymmetry: tourists' accounts become the evidence base for "transformation," while other stakeholders' outcomes are underspecified, leading to the following research agenda priorities, questions and minimum research methods.

A4. Host-defined outcomes and counter-narratives.

- *Research questions*: What counts as "transformative" from host/community perspectives? What forms of change are desired, refused, or experienced as harm?

- *Minimum methods*: participatory action research, co-authored narrative work, or community-led evaluation designs; explicit benefit-sharing and data governance agreements.

A5. Multi-stakeholder valuation and value conflict.

- *Research questions*: Where do tourists' valuations clash with host/community valuations or ecological constraints? How are conflicts negotiated, and who has the authority to resolve them?
- *Minimum methods*: deliberative or multi-criteria valuation; mixed stakeholder sampling; explicit mapping of which indicators are used.

A6. Epistemic justice in methods and interpretation.

- *Research questions*: How do research instruments and platform-mediated storytelling shape what becomes "sayable" as transformation? Which voices are amplified by academic and industry selection practices?
- *Minimum methods*: reflexive method reporting; inclusion of non-tourist data sources (host interviews, worker diaries, ecological indicators); transparent limits of generalization.

8.3. Rethinking Impact: From Metrics to Meaning

Tourism scholarship has long relied on standardized metrics—such as Likert scales, pre/post surveys, and curated testimonials—to evaluate transformative experiences (Tasci & Godovykh, 2021). While these tools provide measurable outputs, they often reduce complex emotional, cultural, and ethical processes to decontextualized data points. This methodological reliance reflects broader tendencies within social science to privilege quantification and universalism over context-specific and embodied knowing (Büscher & Fletcher, 2019).

Such approaches assume that transformation is immediate, linear, and uniformly positive. Yet transformative experiences often unfold non-linearly, with effects that may be deferred, ambiguous, or disruptive. A traveller's sense of personal growth may coincide with the host community's experience of cultural extraction, symbolic labour, or environmental strain (Bellato et al., 2023; Godovykh, 2024). Dominant frameworks rarely account for these asymmetries, nor for the silent, unresolved, or contested aspects of transformation that defy easy narration or measurement. Furthermore, impact assessments typically centre tourist subjectivity, reproducing epistemic hierarchies in which host perspectives are either absent or filtered through researcher-imposed rubrics. This mirrors a broader critique within transformative tourism literature: that even well-intentioned scholarship risks reinforcing colonial dynamics by privileging Western, individualistic models of change (Mair & Reid, 2007).

To redress these limitations, scholars have called for more pluralistic and relational forms of impact evaluation. La Rocca et al. (2025) propose a circular, dialogic model that foregrounds iterative feedback and community co-authorship, while Bellato et al. (2023) argue for the integration of Indigenous epistemologies that challenge the hegemony of text-based and linear impact narratives. These approaches resonate with broader interdisciplinary movements—such as feminist participatory research, political ecology, and decolonial methodologies—that foreground situated knowledge, affective labour, and epistemic justice (Pain, 2004; Escobar, 2008; Todd, 2016). Implementing such approaches requires a paradigm shift. It means engaging not only with what is measured but with how and by whom knowledge is legitimized. Valuing ritual, silence, or refusal as legitimate indicators of transformation demands attentiveness to local cosmologies and power relations. Impact, in this view, is not a fixed outcome but a negotiated process—frequently partial, situated, and co-constructed. By moving beyond standardized metrics, tourism scholars can more ethically and accurately trace the complexity of transformation; illuminating not only what changes, but who defines change and under what conditions it is recognized.

Gap Evidenced in the Review

Impact is frequently measured through immediate post-trip self-report and assumed to be linear and positive; durability, relapse, and unintended harms are less often assessed, especially beyond the tourist (Sections 5 and 6). This creates a mismatch between the scale of claims ("transformative," "ethical," "regenerative") and the scale of evidence, leading to the following research agenda priorities, questions and minimum research methods:

A7. Durability, integration and relapse.

- *Research questions*: Which changes persist after travel, which fade, and why? How do everyday constraints and social contexts shape whether "transformation" becomes practice?
- *Minimum methods*: longitudinal follow-ups (e.g., pre-trip baseline + post-trip + 3/6/12 months); diary or experience-sampling components; transparent reporting of attrition.

A8. Distributed impact evaluation (tourists, hosts, environments, institutions).

- *Research questions*: What are the convergent and divergent impacts across stakeholders? How do environmental and community outcomes relate to tourists' reported meaning and responsibility claims?
- *Minimum methods*: mixed-method evaluation with at least two stakeholder groups; inclusion of ecological or infrastructural indicators where relevant; triangulation (not reliance on a single narrative source).

A9. Ambivalent and negative transformation.

- *Research questions*: When does "transformation" produce guilt without responsibility, appropriation without reciprocity, or harm framed as growth? How do hosts experience tourists' transformative quests?
- *Minimum methods*: critical incident approaches; ethically sensitive protocols; designs that allow for refusal, non-closure, and negative cases.

8.4. Bridging the Scholar–Practitioner Divide Without Neutralizing Critique

Calls to bridge the scholar–practitioner divide have become increasingly central to tourism research, often framed as a means of enhancing the field's applied relevance and fostering innovation (Gretzel et al., 2020; Agapito & Sigala, 2024). However, this emphasis frequently privileges instrumental outcomes over critical reflection, reducing research to a service function in support of operational goals. As a result, scholarship may become subsumed by managerial logic, sidelining structural critique and ethical accountability in favour of market alignment and performance metrics (Tribe, 2010; Jamal & Higham, 2021).

Transformative tourism exemplifies these tensions. Researchers are often enlisted to optimize emotional experiences, quantify authenticity, or lend moral legitimacy to commodified narratives of "meaningful travel" (Bellato et al., 2023). In this dynamic, critique risks being reframed as consultancy, muting its transgressive potential and recasting scholars as ethical stylists rather than agents of epistemic and systemic transformation. This pattern mirrors broader concerns in critical tourism studies about the co-optation of radical discourse by neoliberal institutional frameworks (Dredge & Jamal, 2015).

To move beyond transactional engagement, the scholar–practitioner relationship must shift toward co-theorization and reciprocal knowledge production. Practitioners should not be treated merely as empirical fodder but as epistemic partners navigating tensions of implementation, ethics, and constraint (Kunwar & Ulak, 2024; Bellato et al., 2023). At the same time, scholars must abandon the safety of academic detachment and engage praxis-oriented research that refuses simplification and embraces complexity. Such collaboration demands mutual discomfort and reflexivity. It entails practitioners confronting complicity in inequality and scholars grappling with their own positionality within ex-

tractive knowledge systems. The goal is not harmonization, but an honest grappling with ethical tensions: What does transformation demand of us? Who is rendered invisible by our frameworks? What power relations sustain prevailing narratives? Only when scholars and practitioners engage as equal partners in critical co-production can transformative tourism move beyond aspirational rhetoric toward practice rooted in justice, plural epistemologies, and interdisciplinary depth. Meaningful collaboration must integrate insights from critical pedagogy, political ecology, and decolonial theory to capture the full spectrum of tourism's social, cultural, and affective impacts (Freire, 1978; Escobar, 2008; K. P. Whyte, 2018).

Gap Evidenced in the Review

Industry adoption of "transformative" language is expanding, but the field lacks robust tools to audit claims, evaluate outcomes beyond marketing, and co-design offerings without turning critique into "ethics-as-branding" (Sections 6 and 7). The risk is that scholarship becomes either promotional or disengaged, leading to the following research agenda priorities, questions and minimum research methods:

A10. Auditing transformative claims and consumer-facing promises.

- *Research questions*: How do operators define transformation, what mechanisms do they claim, and what evidence is offered? How do tourists interpret and act on these promises?
- *Minimum methods*: systematic content analysis of marketing and product design scripts; interviews with operators and frontline workers; consumer experiments or field studies on expectation formation.

A11. Design-based research and living labs for accountable transformation.

- *Research questions*: What design features support responsibility and reciprocity rather than extraction? What "aftercare" supports sustain change post-trip?
- *Minimum methods*: design-based research cycles (co-design → pilot → evaluate → revise); pre/post and follow-up evaluation; inclusion of host/community-defined success criteria.

8.5. Designing for Uncertainty, Discomfort and Non-Closure

Mainstream tourism design often centres on narrative closure—curated emotional peaks, cohesive storylines, and redemptive arcs—mirroring Pine and Gilmore's (1999) "memory bump" framework. Transformative travel, as currently commercialized, frequently mimics this formula, offering structured itineraries and guided introspections that promise catharsis and self-actualization (Zheng et al., 2025; Kunwar & Ulak, 2024). Yet this scripted approach reflects not only esthetic sensibilities but also the consumerist expectation that meaning be immediate, legible, and commodifiable.

This paradigm, while marketable, is conceptually thin and ethically fraught. Genuine transformation is rarely linear or comfortable—it often involves contradiction, epistemic dissonance, and sustained uncertainty (Liu & Mair, 2023; Smit et al., 2024). In many cases, transformation resists resolution; it unfolds as a process of unlearning, rupture, or even existential discomfort. As Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory emphasizes, perspective shifts arise from disorienting dilemmas, not from narrative coherence. Thus, experience design must move beyond the orchestration of insight and instead hold space for ambiguity and emotional complexity. Critically, this also demands greater sensitivity to who bears the weight of discomfort. Hosts and marginalized actors are often tasked with producing transformative encounters for tourists—through emotional labour, cultural vulnerability, or symbolic authenticity—without reciprocity or consent (Zheng et al., 2025). Discomfort, when unevenly distributed, can reproduce rather than disrupt power asymmetries.

Moving forward, experience design must be grounded in relational ethics, cultural humility, and interdisciplinary insights from critical pedagogy, environmental psy-

chology (Neuhofer et al., 2021), and postcolonial studies (Taylor, 2009). Embracing indeterminacy—stories without closure, reflections without answers—can foster more honest engagements with transformation. However, discomfort must be facilitated with care and co-created responsibility, not imposed from above or extracted for tourist gratification. Transformative design, then, is not the art of scripting moments but of cultivating ethical conditions where discomfort can be meaningful, growth remains contingent, and transformation is understood as a shared, situated, and non-linear process.

Gap Evidenced in the Review

Many tourism designs optimize comfort, satisfaction, and closure, while transformation claims often rely on disruption, vulnerability, reflection, and prolonged integration (Sections 4 and 6). Without careful design and safeguards, "discomfort" can become either performative or harmful. Hence, the following research agenda priorities, questions and minimum research methods arise:

A12. Discomfort, awe, and ethical learning—conditions and limits.

- *Research questions*: Under what conditions does discomfort support learning and responsibility, and when does it produce defensiveness, voyeurism, or harm? How do these dynamics differ by positionality and context?
- *Minimum methods*: experience-sampling/diaries linked to follow-ups; ethical risk assessment; clear stopping rules and support structures in field research.

A13. Refusing premature closure and building relational continuity.

- *Research questions*: What happens when transformative designs emphasize ongoing responsibility rather than a "life-changing moment"? How can programmes support long-term relational accountability with places and communities?
- *Minimum methods*: longitudinal designs; community feedback loops; evaluation that tracks post-trip practices (not only self-reported intentions).

8.6. Synthesis and Implications: A Call to Recommit

The synthesis below brings the agenda strands together and states the review's interpretive priorities and minimum methodological expectations for future work.

The field of transformative and experiential tourism stands at a critical juncture. Once positioned as a counter-narrative to the homogenization of mass tourism, the discourse of transformation has increasingly been appropriated by academic and commercial frameworks. While its appeal lies in promises of self-discovery, connection, and ethical engagement, such appeal often masks deeper questions: *What* kinds of transformation are being enabled? For *whom*, by *whom*, and under what structural conditions? As the concept becomes more diffuse, it risks functioning as an affective commodity—evocative but analytically underdefined, emotionally resonant but politically shallow.

This review has argued for a necessary reorientation. Transformation must be approached not as a linear journey of personal growth, but as a politically entangled, structurally situated, and epistemically contested process. Prevailing tourist-centred narratives tend to reinforce market ideals of autonomy, optimization, and affective capital (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). In contrast, transformative tourism must engage more directly with decolonial, Indigenous, and Southern epistemologies that frame transformation through continuity, reciprocity, and ecological interdependence (L. B. Simpson, 2014; K. P. Whyte, 2018). While much of the transformative tourism literature focuses on individual introspection or culturally framed growth, there is increasing recognition of the need to operationalize transformation inclusively and relationally. For instance, Page et al. (2025) demonstrate how transformation can be fostered in the context of dementia-friendly outdoor tourism, emphasizing care, accessibility and co-created experiences, and Yagmur and Demirel (2024)

explore motivations, constraints, and strategies for coping with constraints to participate in outdoor recreation activities. This work underscores that transformation is not inherently individualistic or abstract—it can also be material, embodied, and grounded in specific social and health contexts. Such a reframing demands both methodological and conceptual shifts. It requires moving from standardized measurement tools to co-constructed, relational modes of inquiry that recognize situated knowledges (La Rocca et al., 2025). Researchers must embrace ambiguity, resistance, and non-closure as legitimate outcomes—not signs of methodological failure. Interdisciplinary engagement is vital: political ecology offers tools to trace transformation's material and spatial inequalities, while feminist care ethics and Indigenous research methodologies (Tronto, 1993; Wilson, 2008) foreground accountability, relationality, and shared authorship.

Ultimately, the future of transformative tourism research lies in transforming its own foundations. This includes questioning extractive logics, amplifying marginalized cosmologies, and fostering partnerships grounded in critical reflexivity rather than transactional exchange. Transformation cannot be delivered as a product; but it can be cultivated as a relational and ethical practice—if scholars remain committed to intellectual humility, methodological plurality, and justice-driven inquiry.

Minimum Reporting Standards by Claim Type

Across the agenda, one implication is consistent: the more expansive the claim, the more demanding the evidence and accountability requirements. Table 3 provides a compact checklist for aligning experiential, transformative, and multi-stakeholder impact claims with appropriate designs and reporting (definition anchor, time logic, stakeholder scope, and normative assumptions).

Table 4 provides an at-a-glance research program derived from the review and aligned with Figure 1 (grouped into four headline themes to make priorities easy to scan).

9. Conclusions

Experiential and transformative travel now sit at the centre of tourism scholarship and marketing, but conceptual breadth has often come with conceptual drift and methodological over-claiming. This review clarifies what is at stake when tourism research promises "transformation"—and what evidence and accountabilities those promises require.

In line with the Introduction, the core contributions are fourfold: (1) definitional clarification and boundary conditions for experiential versus transformative travel (Table 1) together with a mapping of adjacent labels that commonly blur this boundary (Table 2); (2) an integrative framework that connects valuation, meaning-making, and multi-stakeholder impacts across time (Figure 1); (3) a critical reframing of value and meaning that foregrounds power, positionality, and distribution rather than tourist-only outcomes (Sections 3–5); and (4) a method-specified agenda with practical outputs for cumulative scholarship, including minimum reporting standards (Table 3) and a gap-linked research agenda (Table 4).

Building on these contributions, the agenda prioritizes four headline themes (Table 4):

- Political economy and governance of transformation claims (who defines "good change," who benefits, and who is accountable).
- Epistemic justice and host/community-defined outcomes (whose knowledge counts, and how valuation conflicts are negotiated).
- Durability and distributed impacts (longitudinal designs and multi-stakeholder evaluation, including more-than-human indicators where relevant).
- Practice, design, and auditing (how "transformative" products are built, promised, and evaluated, including post-trip "aftercare").

- Above all, epistemic humility: a readiness to unlearn, to decentre mastery, and to treat accountability as part of method rather than as an optional add-on.

Taken together, these priorities imply a simple discipline: scale the claim to the evidence. When studies invoke "transformation," durability, or justice, they should also specify time, mechanisms, stakeholders, and harms—and avoid treating communities and environments as mere backdrops for tourist self-realization. This is how transformative tourism scholarship can become both analytically rigorous and ethically accountable.

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Appendix A

Appendix A.1. Purpose and Review Logic

This appendix documents the evidentiary base and analytic steps used for the narrated critical integrative review reported in the main manuscript. The aim is to make transparent: (i) how the literature corpus was constructed, (ii) how inclusion boundaries were applied to distinguish experiential from transformative travel research, and (iii) how thematic synthesis and the integrative framework were produced.

Appendix A.2. Database Searching and Retrieval

Databases. The structured search was undertaken in Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection, complemented by forward and backward citation chasing via Google Scholar and database citation tools.

Search date. The database searches reported here were executed on 1–7 December 2025.

Time window. Searches were restricted to 1982–2025 to capture foundational experiential-consumption work and subsequent developments in tourism experience and transformative travel research.

Fields searched. Title, abstract, and keywords.

Document types and language. Peer-reviewed journal articles and review papers were prioritized. Books and book chapters were included where they function as widely cited conceptual anchors in tourism scholarship. Sources were screened in English.

Appendix A.2.1. Search Strings

Scopus (TITLE-ABS-KEY):

(transform* OR "transformative tourism" OR "transformational tourism" OR "transformative travel" OR "tourist transformation" OR "transformational travel") AND (tourism OR travel OR tourist*) AND (experience* OR experiential OR "experience economy" OR meaning OR value OR authentic* OR co-creation OR wellbeing OR mindfulness)

Web of Science Core Collection (Topic/TS):

TS = ((transform* OR "transformative tourism" OR "transformational tourism" OR "transformative travel" OR "tourist transformation" OR "transformational travel") AND

(tourism OR travel OR tourist*) AND (experience* OR experiential OR "experience economy" OR meaning OR value OR authentic* OR co-creation OR wellbeing OR mindfulness)

Appendix A.2.2. Targeted "Conceptual Roots" Searches (Used to Capture Foundations Outside Tourism Journals)

To ensure coverage of conceptual roots frequently referenced in tourism scholarship—particularly where foundational ideas originate outside tourism journals—targeted searches were run using combinations of the following terms (each paired with tourism/travel terms as needed):

- experiential consumption; extraordinary experience
- transformative learning; adult development
- narrative identity; meaning-making
- awe AND (tourism OR travel) AND transform
- existential authenticity; liminality
- co-creation AND (tourism OR travel) AND experience

Appendix A.3. Citation Chasing (Forward/Backward) and Anchor-Set Procedure

Database results were complemented with backward citation chasing (screening reference lists of conceptually central items) and forward citation chasing (screening "cited by" lists for high-relevance follow-ons). Citation chasing was seeded from an anchor set of widely used conceptual and empirical nodes spanning experience research and transformative travel, including (illustrative anchors):

- Pine and Gilmore (1999, 2011); MacCannell (1973); Cohen (1979); N. Wang (1999); Uriely (2005).
- Tung and Ritchie (2011); Kirillova et al. (2017); Reisinger (2013); Voigt et al. (2011)
- Noy (2004); Brown (2009); Pung et al. (2020); Soulard et al. (2021); Tasci and Godovykh (2021).
- Higgins-Desbiolles (2008, 2018, 2020); Dredge and Jamal (2015); Sheller (2018).

The purpose of citation chasing was not to maximize volume, but to reduce the risk of missing high-influence or concept-defining sources that shape how tourism scholars deploy "experience" and "transformation."

Appendix A.4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Appendix A.4.1. Inclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they met one or more of the following criteria:

- Conceptual relevance: explicitly conceptualized, theorized, operationalized, or critically examined experiential travel and/or transformative travel (including close labels used in the field).
- Tourism/travel relevance: engaged tourism/travel as a substantive context rather than using "transformative" in unrelated disciplinary senses.
- Analytic contribution: contributed to at least one of the review's synthesis dimensions (value/valuation, meaning-making, impact distribution, methods/epistemics).
- Foundational grounding: where repeatedly mobilized in tourism scholarship, foundational works from adjacent disciplines were included to clarify conceptual genealogy (e.g., experiential consumption; humanistic psychology; transformative learning; narrative and identity theory).

Appendix A.4.2. Exclusion Criteria

Sources were excluded if:

- "Transformative" referred primarily to organizational/service transformation without conceptual linkage to travel experience or travel-related change processes.
- The work lacked sufficient conceptual/empirical substance for synthesis (e.g., brief mentions with no definitional or analytic development).
- The context was not meaningfully tourism/travel (unless included as a foundational conceptual anchor repeatedly invoked in tourism debates).

Appendix A.5. Screening and Corpus Construction

Appendix A.5.1. What Counts as the "Corpus" in This Narrated Integrative Review

Because narrated integrative reviews incorporate both tourism scholarship and foundational works from adjacent disciplines, the evidentiary base is defined here as the unique sources actively mobilized in the manuscript's synthesis and framework development (i.e., the sources in the manuscript's reference list after deduplication).

Appendix A.5.2. Disciplinary Location Coding (Tourism-Focused vs. Adjacent Foundations)

To clarify disciplinary location (not quality), each unique source was coded as either:

- Tourism-focused: published in a tourism/hospitality/leisure outlet and/or empirically/theoretically centred on tourism travel contexts; or.
- Adjacent/foundational: drawn from neighbouring disciplines (e.g., consumer research, learning theory, political ecology, feminist/decolonial scholarship, evaluation studies) and used primarily for conceptual grounding.

Using this outlet/context coding, the 271-source corpus comprises:

- 168 tourism-focused sources.
- 103 adjacent/foundational sources.

(These counts serve to clarify scope and interdisciplinarity; they are not evaluative rankings.)

Appendix A.6. Analytic Extraction and Coding Protocol

Appendix A.6.1. Extraction Fields (Recorded for Each Included Source)

Each source was read and extracted for:

- Definition use: how "experiential" and/or "transformative" travel is defined, or what assumptions substitute for a definition.
- Mechanisms: processes linking travel to value/meaning/change (e.g., immersion, disruption/liminality, awe/discomfort, reflection, narration, co-creation, relational encounter).
- Valuation language: how "value" is framed (transactional, experiential/hedonic, eudaimonic, ethical/political; individual vs. multi-stakeholder).
- Temporality: how durability is treated (in situ, immediate post-trip, delayed integration, longitudinal follow-up; reversibility/relapse).
- Stakeholder centring: whose outcomes are foregrounded (tourists, hosts/communities, environment, institutions/markets).
- Evidence type/methods: research design (cross-sectional survey, qualitative interviews, diaries, ethnography, mixed methods, participatory designs, digital trace data, etc.).
- Normative assumptions: how "good transformation" is implicitly or explicitly defined; ethical risks (commodification, extraction, performativity, inequality).

Appendix A.6.2. Theme Development (How Sections 3–7 of This Manuscript Were Produced)

Theme development proceeded iteratively:

- First-cycle coding (open): extracting and labelling recurring concepts, mechanisms, and evaluative claims.
- Second-cycle coding (axial clustering): grouping codes into higher-order clusters aligned with the framework's dimensions: value/valuation, meaning-making, impact distribution, and methods/epistemics.
- Constant comparison: checking whether clusters held across (i) experiential vs. transformative sub-streams, (ii) time periods, and (iii) tourism vs. adjacent foundations.
- Memo-writing: documenting why a theme was retained, merged, or split, and linking each theme to representative evidentiary sources.

Themes were retained when they: (a) recurred across multiple sources/sub-streams, (b) explained a major conceptual tension in the literature, and/or (c) had clear methodological or ethical implications relevant to future research design.

Appendix A.7. Framework Construction (Presented at Figure 1 in the Main Text)

The integrative framework (Figure 1) was built by mapping coded evidence into a single explanatory structure:

- Antecedents (traveller orientations/positionality; provider/place design discourse; structural context).
- Mechanisms (encounter processes: immersion, disruption, reflection, narration, co-creation, contested agency).
- Meaning-making and valuation (how value is negotiated, plural, and uneven).
- Outcomes/impacts (distribution and durability across tourists, hosts/communities, environment, institutions/markets).
- Moderators (power, ethics, governance; who defines "good change"; commodification/performativity).
- Evidence constraints (methods capable of supporting particular claims).

Framework elements were retained only where the corpus provided repeated theoretical or empirical support; feedback loops were included where the literature explicitly linked outcomes to subsequent design scripts, institutional practices, and structural conditions.

Appendix A.8. Flow Counts

The structured database search yielded 1284 records. After removing duplicates, 892 unique records remained. Title/abstract screening retained 358 items for full-text review, and final screening resulted in a core corpus of 168 tourism-focused sources. In addition, 103 foundational sources from adjacent disciplines were retained for conceptual grounding where they were repeatedly invoked in tourism scholarship (e.g., experiential consumption, humanistic psychology, transformative learning). Hence, a final evidentiary base of 271 sources was used in the synthesis.

Table A1. Flow summary.

Stage	*n*
Records retrieved (Scopus + Web of Science Core Collection)	1284
Duplicates removed	392
Unique records after de-duplication	892
Retained after title/abstract screening (full texts sought)	358
Excluded after title/abstract screening	534
Tourism-focused sources included after full-text screening (core corpus)	168
Excluded after full-text screening	190
Adjacent/foundational sources retained for conceptual grounding	103
Final evidentiary base used in synthesis (168 + 103)	271

Appendix A.9. Limitations

Narrated integrative reviews require interpretive judgement in: (i) boundary setting and (ii) theme naming and clustering. To minimize bias, this review combined structured database searching with citation chasing and documented extraction fields tied to the integrative framework. Nevertheless, the corpus is shaped by database coverage, search terms, and language constraints, and the disciplinary split (tourism vs. adjacent) is a pragmatic indicator rather than an ontological distinction. Finally, because transformation is treated as contingent and potentially ambivalent, the appendix emphasizes method-claim alignment: strong causal or durability claims require designs capable of supporting them (e.g., longitudinal follow-ups and multi-stakeholder evaluation), which remain unevenly represented in the literature.

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