



A thematic analysis of transformational experiences, from a tourism perspective

Mattias Szczesny

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences

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Abstract

Author(s)

Mattias Szczesny

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Abstract:

In this qualitative study, a thematic analysis was conducted with the purpose of discovering what makes an experience transformative. A transformative experience i.e., transformation, is an elevated form of experience characterized by a lasting lifestyle change. Transformations are as such considered hierarchically above experiences in value progression, and potentially provide an arena for innovation within the tourism business.

The scope of the study was limited to a small-scale inductive inquiry, analyzing a total of 26 online blog posts collected using criterion sampling. The samples were coded with the use of a generic thematic analysis without a priori themes and resulted in two emerging themes describing the most important part for facilitating transformations. The main conclusion made through this study was that transformations are most likely to occur in groups or through the close involvement of other people.

The structure of the study consists of an introduction to the premise of the research question, a theory chapter for the context needed to understand the tourism business perspective, a methodology chapter describing the methods and tools used, a findings chapter showcasing the results of the analysis, and concludes with a discussion chapter containing the researcher's conclusions from the study.

Keywords

Transformation economy, Experience economy, tourism, service design, transformation, experience design.

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1 Introduction

In the modern business environment of the 2020s, technological advancements have exponentially scaled up in intensity across all different sectors of business. The momentum of such advances has in certain ways forced entrepreneurialism that enable massive influxes of innovations, mindsets, strategies, and competition (Reeves 2014). Start-ups utilize tech solutions and ideation tools which contribute to creating the current innovative business milieu, and organically, new methods of creating value and advantages have developed to thrive in today's dynamic markets. (Slush.org & Orrick.com 2020).

At the vanguard of developing value and advantages for services, the pioneers within start-ups, as well as within established companies, expand the limits of theories and methods such as service design and design thinking (Aalto University s.a). These are methods that are also used in the tourism industry (Stickdorn & Zehrer 2009).

Service design theory has in essence remained the same since the late 1920s (Rehn 2010). However, for the past three decades, researchers have worked on theoretical frameworks and predictions to further understand the possibilities of service design and how to enhance its output. One of the most established frameworks (Experience economy) predicts the potential of an emerging transformation economy (Pine & Gilmore 2013; Konzen 2019; Gilliland 2017).

The results of the research made by Pine and Gilmore (2013), among other researchers, is that the next evolutionary development of services will be experiences infused with transformative elements, effectively elevating the whole experience economy to a new category and potential market.

The main aim of this study is to discover what elements enable transformational experiences by utilizing a thematic analysis. The research will scrutinize online blog posts related to perceived life-changing experiences, collected by criterion sampling, to generate descriptive codes. The codes will then be further refined before being assessed for correlative links before the final thematic analysis for emerging themes. The results of the emerging themes will then be discussed with a tourism industry and service design focus.

The scope of the study is limited to a small-scale inductive inquiry. Subjective input relevant to transformational elements will be discussed through attributed themes. As such the objective is not to prove any existing theory but to provide further insight into potential directions for business growth within the tourism industry.

The structure of this study consists of six chapters: Introduction, two theoretical chapters, methodology, findings, and discussion. The first two theoretical chapters comprise the frameworks and context needed to understand the premise of the research question. The methodology chapter will describe the research design and methods, followed by the findings chapter visualizing the data analysis before the final discussion chapter containing the researcher's conclusions.

2 Service design and Experience economy

The main overlying theoretical framework involved as a foundational background for this study is the experience economy theory, and its predicted emergence of a new categorization of experiences called transformations. This chapter will introduce a general overview of the concepts behind the experience economy, including relevant terminology and methods.

2.1 Service Design methods

Service design is a major idea behind many of the methods by which businesses plan and structure their services. Service design focuses on empathizing with customers and using customer understanding as a primary base for design-related decision-making (see Figure 1.). In contrast to making design decisions by strictly using the subjective opinions of the developing team or market analysis reports.

Service design methods are implemented by utilizing tools such as empathy maps, customer journeys, and service blueprints among many others. Using those tools, businesses can ideate and research different users' experiences, after which they have a solid foundation to proceed iteratively with development by using the input gained. (Zomerdijk & Voss 2009; Lamia.fi s.a; Stickdorn & Zehrer 2009).

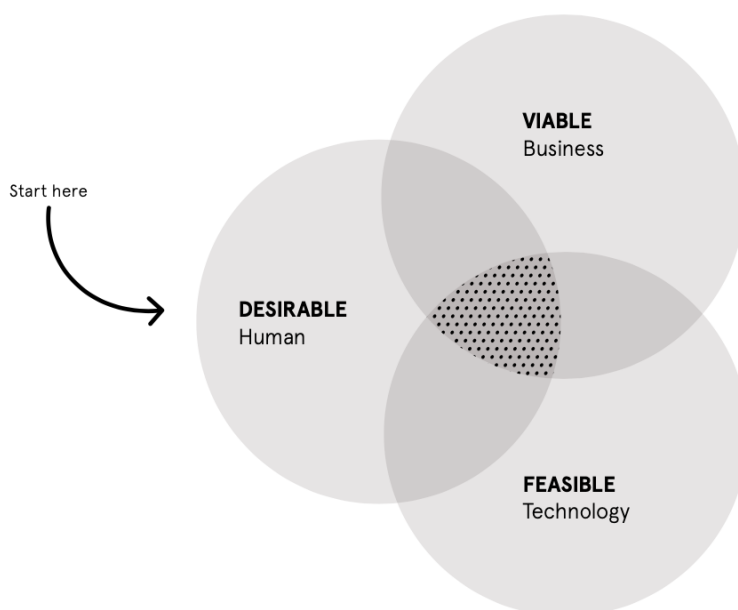


Figure 1. Visualization of a service design thinking approach. (IDEO.org 2015)

Service design is currently most often used as an umbrella term for many different tools originating out of the service design framework (Lamia.fi s.a). Many trends have developed from service design experiments. The most recent and common ones are User Experience (UX/UE), Customer Experience (CX), Interactive Experience Design (IxD), and User-centric design (UCD) among others. (Puthiyamadam & Reyes 2018, 12; Papis 2019).

Researchers and experts at the spearhead of these trends have developed new theories to expand their business design strategies, theories that also provide grounds for further discussions and research in understanding the possibilities in the competitive business environments. One of the more prevalent theories is called the “Experience Economy” (Pine & Gilmore 1998). Within this theory, contributors Pine and Gilmore argue that the next step to produce an advantage for products or services is to elevate the customer’s experience to what they call a transformation.

2.2 Fundamentals of the experience economy framework

In its most simplified and understandable form, the experience economy concept is a hierarchical model which describes a concrete pattern that a product or service has followed to increase its economic value over time and become relevant on the market.

The basis for this pattern is that as a product becomes common, the actors involved in the market competition adapt the product according to the customer or consumer needs, which elevates the product on the hierarchy (see Figure 2). The higher a product is able to reach on the hierarchy the higher the demand for the product will be, which in theory increases the price equilibrium and also pricing leverage (Pine & Gilmore 2013).

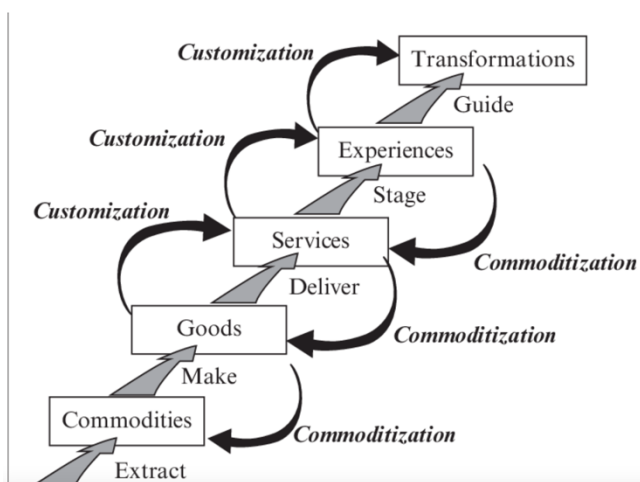


Figure 2. Progression of economic value. (Pine & Gilmore 2013)

The claim of increased pricing and leverage is in line with the theory of supply and demand, as the evolved state of each economy brings a new market and as such an initial scarcity. The demand will naturally increase beyond the possible supply until the new economy has become established and in abundance. (Worschel, Lee & Adewole 1975).

Classic examples of business concerning coffee or birthday celebrations can showcase this theory in practice by finding the price ranges of commodities, goods, services, and experiences and comparing as seen in the bar charts of figure three.

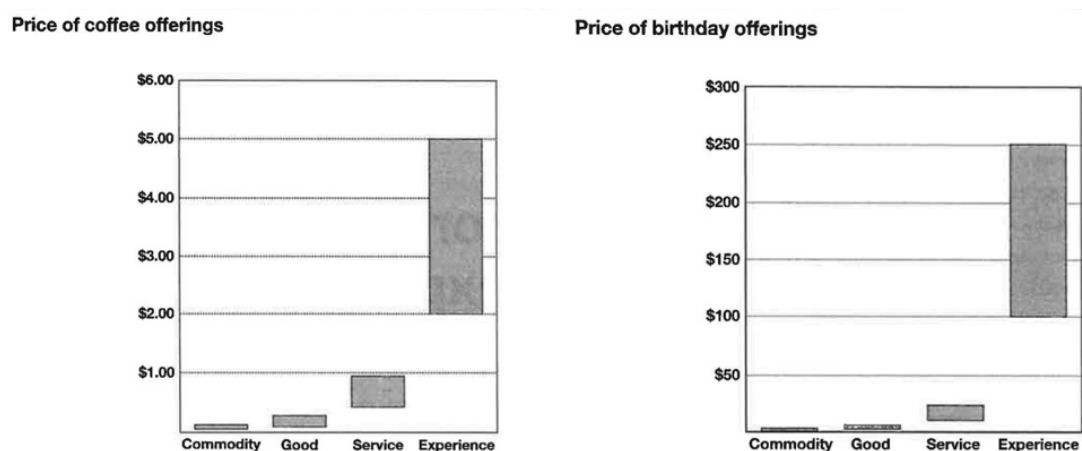


Figure 3. Pricing comparisons. (Pine & Gilmore 2011)

The pricing example of coffee is one of the simplest ways to visualize the concept. The commodity of coffee is the coffee bean. As the bean gets professionally refined into its ready-to-use form at a roastery the price tag goes up. By the time the consumer pays for the coffee at the local barista, the price can reach 5 dollars, which as showcased in the bar chart has exponentially increased the price. (Pine & Gilmore 2011).

If the prediction of an emerging transformation type experience is true, then a tourism company that designs packages and experiences that are tailored to be transformational can gain an immense advantage over the competitors and be able to set a high premium price, as the charts indicate a consistently exponential growth in the pricing leverage for every stage of economic value. (Pine & Gilmore 2011).

2.3 Experience design in tourism

The tourism industry has for many decades adopted a service, and or, experience design mindset when developing destinations and attractions (Tussyadiah 2013). The main difference between service design and experience design (UX) is that the service design as a

principle organizes the company operations to develop services and touchpoints needed to fit the results from their empathizing customer research. UX on the other hand put the focus on refining and enhancing what the customer can perceive and experience when interacting with the company and its products or services. (Gibbons 2021).

That is why various researchers and experts consider UX as supplementary to service design, as service design creates the very touchpoints which serve as platforms where UX can be used for competitive advantage. UX alone is not enough on its own to create a functioning business. (Gibbons 2021; Penin 2018). UX has however been implemented into the tourism industry ever since the early 2000s and is continuing to evolve and merge its innovations within the tourism service designs. (Kim & Fesenmaier 2014; Smit & Melissen 2018).

Researching how UX methods and experiences in a general sense can be improved, ultimately leads to attempts to find how to elevate an experience. This is one reason why the proposed prediction by Pine and Gilmore (2013) of a new and elevated type of experience is grounds for further research of transformations and if there is any possibility of enhancing the innovative efforts currently in place.

The tourism sector as a business arena has developed with immense speed (Jafari 1984). For multiple decades, traditional tourism destinations have grown to such magnitude of success that the local economies have serious and problematic situations arise in terms of sustainability, ability to provide adequate services, and resistance from the local populace (Milano, Novelli & Cheer 2019). Such overwhelming success of the popular tourist destinations not only prove harmful to the destination itself but also removes revenue from other nearby tourist locations as they struggle to compete. An economic value elevation of the tourism experiences offered could potentially reduce the growing problem and contribute to a better balance within the current market distribution of tourism.

3 Transformations

Service design, experience economy, and developing business strategies are relevant to the study from a business standpoint. However, understanding the underlying needs for tourism services is also required to fully recognize the potential for the transformations. This chapter will introduce relevant theories and terms from a consumer behavior standpoint for a deeper understanding of the potential significance of the research in the field.

3.1 Motivations behind transformations

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), the highest form of a product on the market is an experience, as an experience is a form of service elevated in its maturity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, through the lens of decades of previous research and analysis relevant to the experience economy framework, its authors and contributors predict that the next highest form that will emerge will be transformations, effectively creating a transformation economy (Pine & Gilmore 2013).

Customer research, from the service and UX fields, with a focus on value creation and customization, indicate a possible correlation and traction with the transformation economy prediction (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004; Bowman & Ambrosini 2002). The correlation is most evident in the link between the studies concerning the pattern of customization and commoditization, as described in the earlier illustration (see Figure 2). Evidence points toward relatively high credibility to the predicted emergence of a new level in the hierarchy of economic value, be it transformations or otherwise. Experience and service designers in the tourism industry have to know what exactly separates an experience from the next potential form to capitalize on such an emergence.

According to Pine and Gilmore (2013), a transformation has the characteristics of being associated with individual actualization. Actualization, or self-actualization, is also the highest tier of needs in the theory of human motivation by Abraham Maslow (Taormina & Gao 2013). Self-actualization is a term that is described as realizing personal potential and a desire to become everything one is capable of becoming (McLeod 2018). Self-actualization is arguably also a major motivation behind traveling and tourism (Pearce & Calta-biano 1983; Chen, Bao & Huang. 2013).

A transformation in layman's terms can be defined as an experience that enables a lifestyle change. A lifestyle change by definition correlates with the result that a transformation type experience is set out to achieve, which makes what participants perceive in such experiences of immense value (American Psychological Association 2010). Factors

contributing to the transformation involved in a life-changing experience could be adapted and implemented in a tour, travel package, or travel destination that is mainly of immersion, absorption, and active participation focus.

A life-changing experience could potentially be linked with a negative catalyst, which is typically of a traumatic nature (Baumeister et al. 2001). Baumeister and the co-authors (2001) of the article argue that negative experiences are known to contribute more to transformations than positive experiences. However, this study will not analyze the negative catalysts of the life change but solely focus on the driving and enabling elements behind the transformative developments from the perceived experience.

Motivations behind tourism have long been studied and generally determined to be a part of a complex matrix of factors, spanning from psychological, social, and financial reasons intertwined. These matrixes of factors are usually simplified and clustered into one of four-five generalized terms or categories (Jurowski 2009), such as they are visualized in figure four.

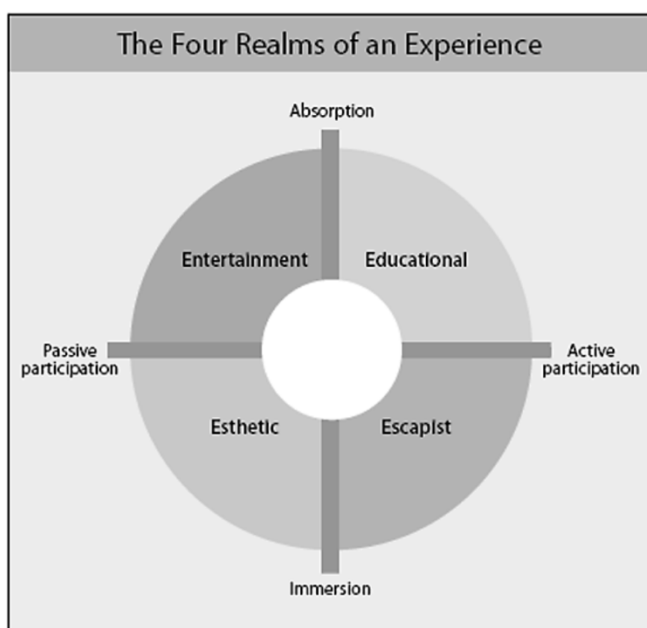


Figure 4. The Four realms of experience. (Pine & Gilmore 1998)

These types of generalized umbrella terms or categories are part of many theories attempting to forecast tourist hotspots and understand customer behavior, however, it has been disputed as it is not adequately measured to be definitive and their boundaries extremely fluid (Jurowski 2009). Researchers often pair the generalized terms (see figure 5.) with other psychological motivations (Robinson, Heitmann & Dieke 2011) and the results

do point towards a further justification for tourism experiences having the potential to evolve into transformations.

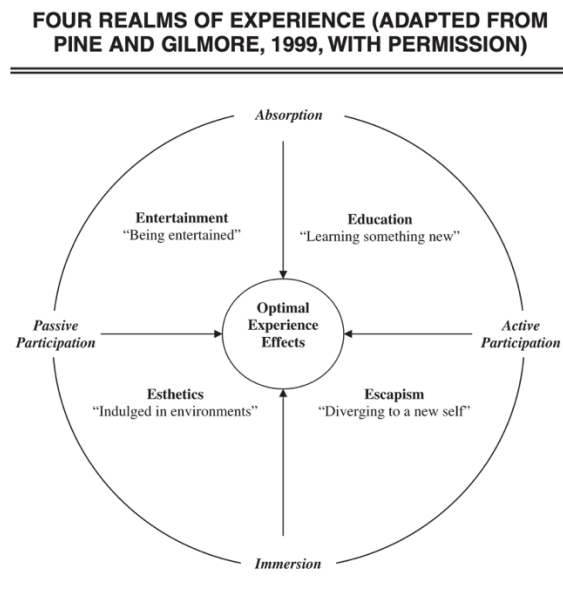


Figure 5. Adapted four realms of experience figure. (Oh, Fiore & Jeoung 2007)

A clear example is when escapism is paired with seeking (Robinson et al. 2011) as the tourist not only escapes from the routines and environment but also seeks something new and potentially intangible. By face value, escapism amounts to getting away from the everyday routines and being temporarily immersed in a setting with as much contrast to them as possible. However, the resulting satisfaction from providing the escapist tourist with an immersive experience is fleeting and after time and repetition, risks no longer being satisfactory (Robinson et al. 2011). As the satisfaction diminishes the escapists' motivation is revealed to include the said seeking motivation but pinpointing what is being sought for is often intangible. The intangible factor has the prospect of being a transformational experience, or transformation, which calls for further understanding of how exactly to create such a transformation.

On the other end of the spectrum based on the four realms of experience hypothesis, there are the educational motivations. When applied to the tourism industry the primary example is a tourist that is participating in an experience meant for absorbing certain information that will elevate the individual's perception of self, thus contributing to self-actualization. (Oh, Fiore & Jeoung 2007). In this case, the link with a transformational experience is evident by comparing the definition of the results.

By observing figure four, we can also find that there is a realm of experiences that is facilitated by passive participation. These experiences are motivated by a combination of entertainment and aesthetics and appear to not have any need for transformational elements at all. Further combining the passive participation motivations with escapism motivations is a relatively common occurrence leading to solutions such as video games and other digital entertainment. (Warmelink, Harteveld & Mayer 2009).

Such observations are important to highlight as to not assume that the transformations are an end-all experience that applies to every type of service. However, by the four realms, we can see the feasibility of transformations in a significant amount of motivation type combinations.

3.2 Quality of life and future of leisure

Tourism is in many ways a commercialized leisure experience, and leisure is a necessary component of a satisfactory life experience. When measuring happiness and satisfaction in research terms it is often referenced under the terminology Quality of Life (QoL). The role of leisure in terms of QoL has been discussed since the ancient times of Greek philosophers like Aristotle. (Kuykendall, Boemerman & Zhu 2018)

The definition of leisure has traditionally been residual and experiential. Residual means any activity that is non-paid and non-compulsory (Haworth & Veal 2004), the experiential defines leisure as being motivated by intrinsic wants and choices (Neulinger & Thomas 1976). Leisure in contemporary thoughts is best defined as a combination of both definitions, with an added element of need for detachment-recovery.

Detachment-recovery is a form of leisure where a worker can refrain from any thoughts related to work to recover from exhaustion and stress accumulation. Detachment-recovery is what we most commonly refer to as leisure in the modern business milieu. Tourism and travel have throughout the decades become established as one of the most preferred and effective methods of facilitating leisure and increasing the QoL because of their ability to provide detachment-recovery. (Kuykendall et al. 2018, Sonnentag & Fritz 2015, Epperson 1983)

With the advent of the digital workplace and an increasing online leisure preference shift (Gallistl & Nimrod 2019), the lines between stress management, leisure, and work have become increasingly blurred, and new methods for improving QoL continuously developed

(Lehrer & Woolfolk 2021). The use of traditional tourism services is becoming less appealing and its practice for leisure gradually deteriorating in effectiveness.

Attempting to correlate tourist motivations, such as escapism and seeking, with the emerging trends of staycations uncovers a contradiction that indicates that the traditional experiences facilitated by tourism packages run the risk of failing to meet the customer's expected satisfaction and missing the possibility of improving their QoL (Sharma 2009). Sightseeing tours and resort packages must provide something more than comfort and aesthetics that can be found online or doesn't require travel to compete. Experiences that lead to self-actualization with lasting effects increasing QoL could be what opens the new arena for the tourism industry newcomers to compete and struggling companies to re-engage the potentially lost customers.

4 Methodology

This chapter will explain the research methodology used to allow the readers to get an overall insight into how the study was conducted. The transparency and accessibility of a methodology chapter provide the means for evaluating if the research is reliably made.

4.1 Qualitative and quantitative research methods

Research method is a term for the techniques, strategies, and processes that a researcher uses to discover the information needed for the study. Traditionally, research methods are divided into three categories: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. (University of Newcastle 2020)

A study is considered categorically quantitative when it is primarily concerned with data in the form of numbers. Analysis of empirical and numerical measurements obtained by controlled experiments are used to prove or disprove certain theories by using the findings from the statistics as arguments (Sale, Lohfeld & Brazil 2002).

Qualitative methods on the other hand investigate and observe phenomena as they naturally happen or are perceived, with the use of interpretive tools adhering to varied frameworks (Lowhorn 2007). The qualitative method is used when the findings cannot be adequately measured by empirical data, such as emotions, experiences, descriptive statements. (McLeod 2019).

There is also a hybrid category of research methods called the mixed method. The mixed-method consists of both a qualitative part and a quantitative part and is becoming more common in certain fields of research such as healthcare, where both approaches are needed at times to fully access areas of interest limited by only using one type of methodology. (Sale et al. 2002)

This is a qualitative study. The research question in this study is primarily concerned with observing subjective perceptions and arriving at discussions that build on understanding the situation observed, in line with Lowhorn's (2007) descriptions of qualitative research. The findings of this study are of an inductive nature understanding emotions, subjective beliefs, and arbitrary opinions connected to the experience, which cannot be adequately translated into numbers. Therefore, the use of a quantitative or hybrid method was not considered for this study.

4.2 Research design

The qualitative method is often linked to the use of philosophical approaches as an overarching guideline to adhere to reliable and legitimate research quality (Pryce et al 2014). In this study, an interpretative approach as proposed by Matthews & Ross (2010) will be utilized, and the tool used for analysis will be a thematic analysis, as described by Clarke & Braun (2016). The interest of the study lies in understanding subjective descriptions, which is typical of the interpretivist paradigm, as described by Jane Setten (2018). The interpretative approach philosophy is appropriate in this study as it operates from the perspective that every individual has a subjective understanding and logic behind what they are perceiving. With an interpretative approach, the study will be able to access what patterns may be evident across multiple subjective testimonies. (Matthews & Ross 2010).

It is also worth noting that there are other types of analysis tools, aside from the selected thematic analysis, that have their different advantages. Such tools are for example interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which could extract findings more in-depth over a longer time frame, and template analysis which is more efficient in handling larger datasets (Symon & Cassell 2013). However, the generic thematic analysis described by Clarke & Braun (2016) is better suited for this study as the starting point for this study is without any a priori themes. Furthermore, the generic thematic analysis inherently has flexibility by not being linked to any particular research position, which improves the potential for novel and objective interpretative findings.

The advantage of not using a priori themes or adhering to any particular research position is that the findings will be of a more apparent nature, accessible to a wider range of readers. Thematic analysis is especially useful for researchers that are novices in the field of study as the data can be thoroughly examined and processed without the need for in-depth advanced theories typically used by experts in the field.

The downside of not employing a priori themes and not being linked to any research positions is that the results may be scrutinized and criticized for their relevancy in a further discussion by experts within the field of research. However, even in such an outcome where the relevancy of the findings is criticized, there is still potential for finding value from the generic analysis by further discussing why the outcome is not relevant to the established research directions, and if anything can be inducted because of it. To ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of the analysis in this study the stages will be documented in the results chapter, and the techniques suggested by Nowell et al. (2017) will be considered at the code generation stage.

4.3 Data collection

The population relevant to this study is anyone that has perceived a positively life-changing experience. The reason behind using a positive life-changing experience as a parameter is that the defining characteristics of such experiences are similar to that of transformations according to Pine and Gilmore (2013), and supported by the Maslow pyramid theory (Taormina & Gao 2013) as explained in subchapter 3.2 Transformations.

The selected form of data for this study is personally written and published text testimonies through online blogging. The main justification for the use of secondary data in form of blog posts is the inherent exclusion of any involvement in the data production process, thereby removing any potential for bias contamination coming from the primary collection process. The data will effectively by nature of its generation be closer to the subject's own unaltered opinions, which is preferable when using an interpretative approach.

Another advantage considered in the choice of utilizing blogs is that scanning for relevant blog posts has the potential of being less time-consuming than finding interviewees and conducting interviews, which is the main alternative data collection option. There is a remarkable number of blogs containing data with immense value for research, and its use has become more and more acceptable for research. (Chenail 2011).

In order to distinguish which among the thousands of potentially relevant blog posts to collect, a criterion sampling data collection method will be used for this study. Criterion sampling is a type of purposeful sampling method utilized in qualitative studies to determine via selected criteria which sample out of a larger set has a high probability of being rich in relevant information. (Palinkas et al. 2015). The collection criteria in this study will serve both the purpose of greater accuracy in data collection and increase the relevancy and validity of the research by ensuring the sample has information linked to the relevant theoretical frameworks.

A sample size of 10 textual samples from secondary sources is the recommended minimum in a thematic analysis according to Clarke & Braun (2016) and Symon & Cassell (2012). Both referenced publications indicate that such a sample size is enough to extract useful information while also providing the possibility to detect potential outliers in the analysis without disrupting the findings. As the scope of this study is that of a small-scale inquiry, this study will follow the recommendation of collecting a minimum of 10 blog posts.

Table 1. Index of search keywords, and selection criteria.

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Keywords | |
| Main | Life, changing, experience, transformation, event, story. |
| Supporting | My, that, the, changed, changes, change, forever, different, process, positive, for, journey, story. |
| | |
| Criteria: | |
| #1 | Conclusion of the text is related to a perceived transformation. |
| #2 | The perceived transformation must be described as persisting. |
| #3 | Maximum of one blogpost per author. |

The first step in the data collection process is a database search. Table 1 shows the selected criteria used in this research. For a blog post to be considered it must be discovered by using the listed selected keywords or closely related synonyms. After the sample has been marked as potentially relevant, a quick scan of its content is made to determine if the three further criteria are fulfilled, after which the blog post is collected and considered for the study. The keywords selected for the search are words that are closely linked to the nature and goal of a transformation as described by Pine and Gilmore (2013). The keywords, together with the first criteria, serve to determine a high probability of relevancy of the sample to the research question. The two following criteria are used for the purpose of increasing the reliability of the research.

4.4 Data analysis

Data analysis is the term for detecting, evaluating, and discussing the content of the gathered sample. Ultimately data analysis enables the researchers to use the data for forming a conclusion. There are many tools, methods, and techniques to analyze data, but there are three points that all have in common: Each datum has to be analyzed the same way, all data collected has to be included in the study, and answering the research question is the focus of the analysis. (Matthews & Ross 2010).

As the objective of this research is to discover elements within textual data using themes, the chosen method for analysis as previously stated will be a thematic analysis as described by Clarke and Braun (2016).

In the first stages of a thematic analysis the researcher carefully familiarizes and scrutinizes the textual data by coding sections of it in brief descriptions, this is called code generation (see figure 6). Coding is a simple method to capture the meaning behind a block of text into a brief label. Typically, when researching a set of data there can be a vast number of different codes. As the researcher familiarizes themselves with the data the codes are collapsed or joined into code groups, until eventually at the end of the coding process there is a suitable number of codes for the analysis. (Howitt & Cramer 2014).

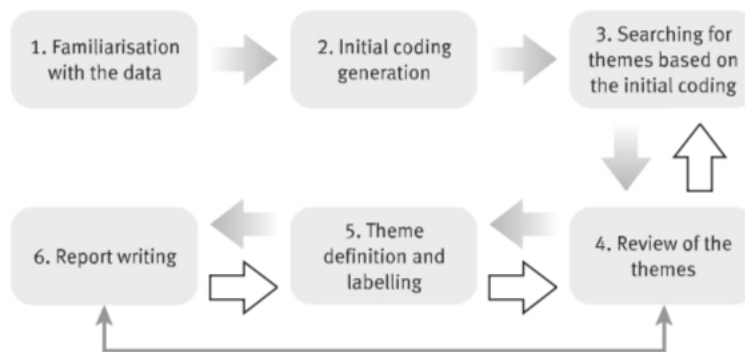


Figure 6. Braun and Clarke thematic analysis model (Howitt & Cramer 2014).

When all relevant codes have been processed and finalized, the thematic analysis proceeds by finding correlations and links between the codes. These linked codes comprise various themes (see Figure 7). As themes that link data sets emerge, they can eventually be further analyzed for correlation across all the data samples for validation and relevancy (Howitt & Cramer 2014).

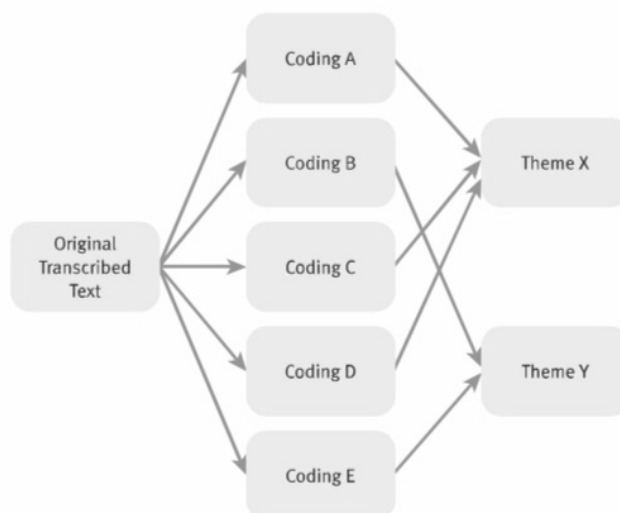


Figure 7. Relationship between textual data, coding, and detected themes (Howitt & Cramer 2014)

4.5 Timeline

This study was conducted between October 2021 and April 2022, starting with the literature review and foundational theoretical work. Data collection was done between January-February 2022. In parallel with the analysis, the theoretical work was further expanded and revised for structure and coherency. The schedule for the research can be found depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Research timeline.

| Research tasks | 2021 | | | 2022 | | | |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | Oct. | Nov. | Dec. | Jan. | Feb. | Mar. | Apr. |
| Literature review and theoretical work | | | | | | | |
| Data collection | | | | | | | |
| Coding | | | | | | | |
| Analysis | | | | | | | |

5 Findings

This chapter will showcase the results of the data collection and analysis. The first subchapter is concerning statistics. Statistics and numbers are normally used in quantitative studies, however, in this study they serve the purpose of transparency for reliability purposes. The second subchapter will summarize the coding process and results before the final subchapter describing how the process of discovering the main themes. To effectively facilitate the analysis process, the software ATLAS.ti was used to enter all codes, perform text searches, count instances, visualize connections and correlations.

5.1 Statistics

This study set out with the aim to collect a minimum of 10 random blog posts adhering to the specified search criteria from the methodology chapter. However, following the initial data collection there were indications of potential for further emerging themes, therefore additional data was collected until saturation.

A total of 26 blog posts were collected. The average post length was 1 100 words per post. However, the median is around 800 words, indicating that blog posts have a wide range of density. Out of the random sample collection, the ratio between female and male authors is approximately 3:1. Any statistics such as word counts and clouds are limited to being supplementary to familiarizing with the data, justifying the need for a qualitative approach and the use of thematic analysis for a more accurate understanding. (See figure 8)

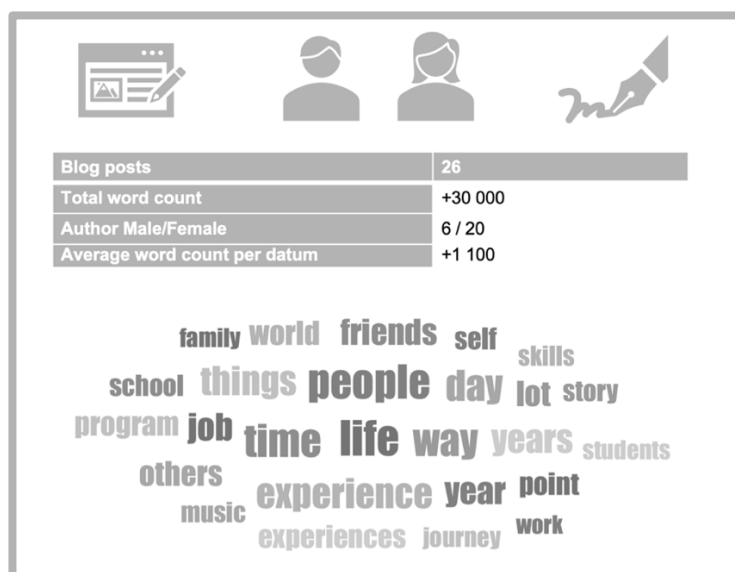


Figure 8. Statistics of data collection followed by word cloud displaying nouns in order of prevalence.

5.2 Content coding

The coding process started by summarizing all paragraphs of the text into short descriptions. When all samples were through the first round of processing, further refinement was made by generating codes that summarize the description of each paragraph. Theoretical frameworks related to the study such as Maslow's pyramid of needs, the four realms of an experience theory, and the experience economy were considered for the generation of codes, for the codes to remain focused on the research question. As the codes gradually become established and ultimately the data is considered saturated, a third round of refining is made to collapse coherent codes into code groups, effectively optimizing the codes for efficiency by highlighting the main point of the paragraphs.

During the collapsing of coherent code groups, three types of code categories were defined. The defining of such categories was done for additional accessibility; for understanding and organizing the findings. The three code categories defined were:

- **Motivations:** Descriptive accounts of what motivated the person to engage or initiate the experience which led to the transformation.
- **Facilitators:** Code groups that describe what enabled the transformation to take place
- **Inhibitors:** Code groups of elements that worked against transformations.

After the third round of refining and collapsing codes by relevancy to the research objective, the results were 16 code groups from 119 quotations, divided into three categorization types. (See figure 9.)

| Motivation codes | Frequency | Facilitator codes | Frequency |
|------------------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| ● Self-actualization | 32 | ● Togetherness | 38 |
| ● Independence | 18 | ● Overcome barriers | 30 |
| ● Challenge | 16 | ● Learning | 20 |
| ● Altruism | 13 | ● Appreciation of life | 18 |
| ● Health | 8 | ● Physical activity | 10 |
| ● Escapism | 6 | ● Unfamiliar settings | 10 |
| | | ● Spirituality | 9 |
| | | ● Aesthetics | 5 |
| | | ● Creativity | 2 |
| Inhibitor codes | Frequency | | |
| ● Being online to much | 4 | | |

Figure 9. Codes utilized in this study.

5.3 Thematic analysis

While codes are useful for finding the relevant information, the thematic analysis provides the context for a deeper understanding of the data. Utilizing the established codes the thematic analysis begins by identifying where in the data the most relevant information can be found, as revealed by the frequency of correlations (See Table 3.). The use of correlations is justified as it saves time and provides an additional nuance of validation for the analysis process.

Table 3. Code correlations table.

| | •Altruism Gr=13 | •Appreciation of life Gr=18 | •Challenge Gr=16 | •Creativity Gr=2 | •Escapism Gr=6 | •Esthetics Gr=5 | •Health Gr=8 | •Independence Gr=18 | •Learning Gr=20 | •Overcome barriers Gr=30 | •Physical activity Gr=10 | •Self-actualization Gr=32 | •Spirituality Gr=9 | •Togetherness Gr=38 | •Unfamiliar settings Gr=10 |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| •Altruism Gr=13 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 8 | 2 |
| •Appreciation of life Gr=18 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 8 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 7 | 1 |
| •Challenge Gr=16 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| •Creativity Gr=2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| •Escapism Gr=6 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| •Esthetics Gr=5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| •Health Gr=8 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| •Independence Gr=18 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 10 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| •Learning Gr=20 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 10 | 2 | 7 | 3 |
| •Overcome barriers Gr=30 | 6 | 8 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 7 | 0 | 4 | 12 | 1 | 15 | 6 |
| •Physical activity Gr=10 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 6 | 2 |
| •Self-actualization Gr=32 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 10 | 10 | 12 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 8 | 4 |
| •Spirituality Gr=9 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| •Togetherness Gr=38 | 8 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 7 | 15 | 6 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| •Unfamiliar settings Gr=10 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 5 | 0 |

The tool used to analyze the codes was the ATLAS.ti code co-occurrence table. The codes are represented by both a horizontal row and a vertical column. Next to the code name is the Gr variable, which stands for “Groundeness” and relates to the number of code appearance instances. The Gr variable effectively represents how relevant a code is by merit of quantity. By utilizing this information, outliers such as creativity as the facilitator and escapism as the motivator can be identified. These are considered outliers because of their lack of relevancy evident by low Gr, and further validated by the low frequency of correlations, and as such, do not need to be analyzed in more depth for this study.

Using both a horizontal row and a vertical column for the representation of the codes enables the mentioned frequency of correlation to be numerically displayed within the inter-joining cells. This is further indicated by the intensity of color shade (see Table 3), where darker shades equal a higher frequency. Alternative visualization of the correlations can be made through a Sankey chart (see figure 10), where lines are drawn between codes, and their thickness reflects frequency.

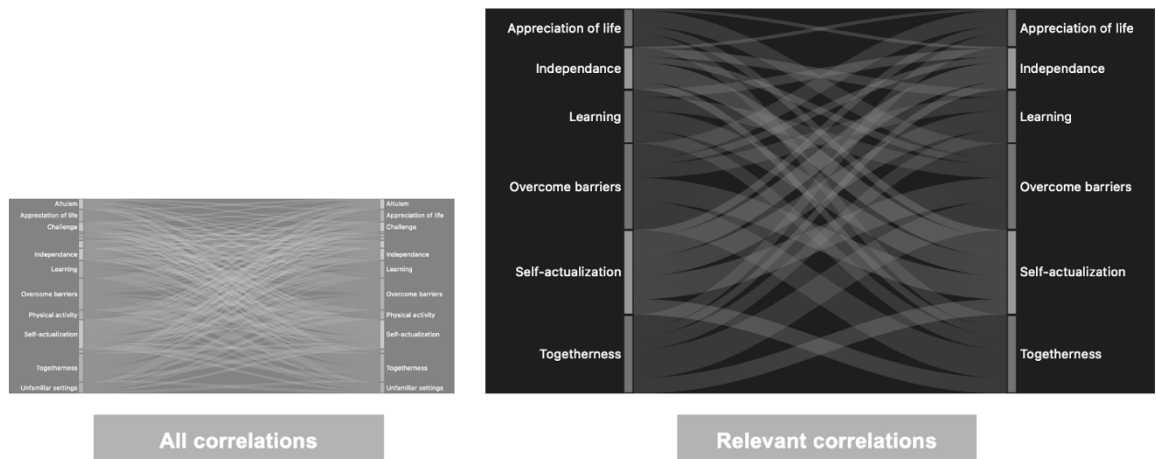


Figure 10. Sankey chart visual of correlations between codes

By pairing codes that are correlated, theme suggestions start to emerge (see figure 7). The themes are initially based on arbitrary interpretations of the researcher, however, using the coding software the theme can be validated by locating the correlating instances and scrutinizing the comprising quotes and paragraphs to compare the narratives.

Interpretation of the correlating codes and quotes is then done until exhausting the data for emerging themes at which point the most reliable one can be determined by both prevalence and matching narratives. In this study, two main themes emerged: the sense of belonging and rising to a personal challenge.

5.3.1 Theme: Sense of belonging

The theme “Sense of belonging” comprises three main codes, two facilitators (Overcome barriers, Togetherness) and one motivator (Self-actualization). These three codes have the highest number of correlations between each other, and also are the three codes with the highest Gr value (see table 3). On closer inspection of code occurrences across sample cases, there is evidence supporting the Gr value as being accurate in determining relevancy as the codes appear in all sample cases. (See figure 11).

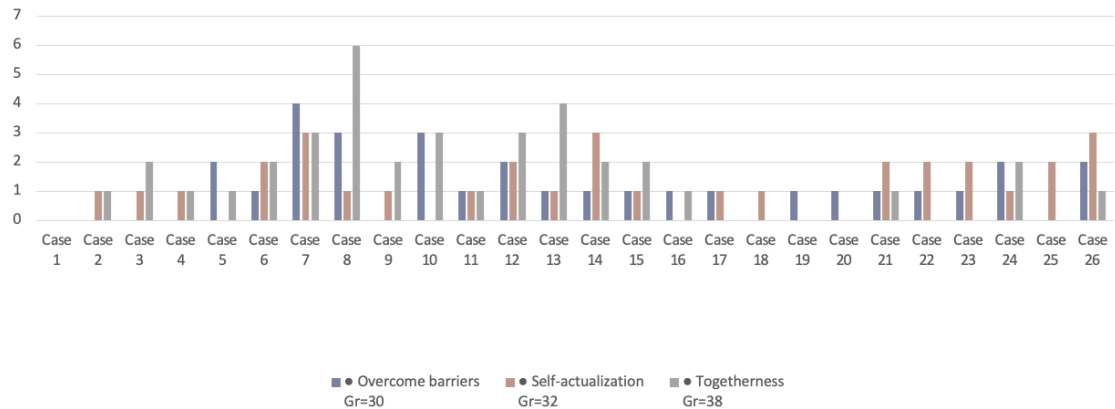


Figure 11. Chart of code occurrences by case.

The theme “Sense of belonging” suggests that the most important part of an experience in the context of transformations is that other persons are playing a significant part in the experience. This suggestion can be found throughout paragraphs with correlated codings, such as in these excerpt examples:

Case 8:2 ¶ 11: “amazing women created a real special and emotional atmosphere. Every one was crying at the same scenes ;-)”

Case 10:1 ¶ 2: “being human together. “

Case 10:5 ¶ 7 – 8: “Travelers do that naturally: not just living alongside each other, but together. It is the appreciation for each other, the mutual respect that follows from the human connection.”

Case 15:6 ¶ 1-2: “That was the experience that changed my life because I realized that I could make friends by my own, that I did have talents”

The motivator Self-actualization is prevalent in almost every case, it is a stable element behind a majority of the samples collected (see figure 11). Self-actualization may seem like an inherently individual component of the experience, however, in the correlated paragraphs we can find quotes on self-actualization concerning relations to others such as:

Case 14:1 ¶ 3 – 4: “I wanted to build character, experience living in a completely different environment, all whilst working with children and meeting new people”

Case 24:3 ¶ 7 – 9: “I believe the processes I went through in gaining leadership experience will empower me long after graduation.”

The narratives of the samples that deeply adhere to this theme are very various. The person may attribute a low QoL to virtually anything or not even know what the cause is. However, despite the root of the QoL issue, the solution was in a transformation indicated by perceiving being a valued part of other people's lives or in a bigger picture.

Case 21:4 ¶ 17: "I am forever thankful for Leah's persistence in asking me to workout with her. My "no" clearly meant "not right now" and she was there for me once I came around. Like most people, I just needed time to make the choice that I was ready to take control of my health for me and for no one else. It's a scary commitment."

The sense of belonging can be interpreted as the final indicator that a transformation has successfully been experienced. This finding is in line with the theory of Maslow's hierarchy of needs for self-actualization, to become part of something bigger than oneself.

5.3.2 Theme: Rising to a personal challenge

The theme of rising to a personal challenge is very different from the previous one. The motivator in this theme is a drive towards a more independent and self-sufficient lifestyle. The facilitators for this theme consist of the motivator Independence, and the facilitators Overcoming barriers, Learning, and Appreciation of life. (See figure 12).

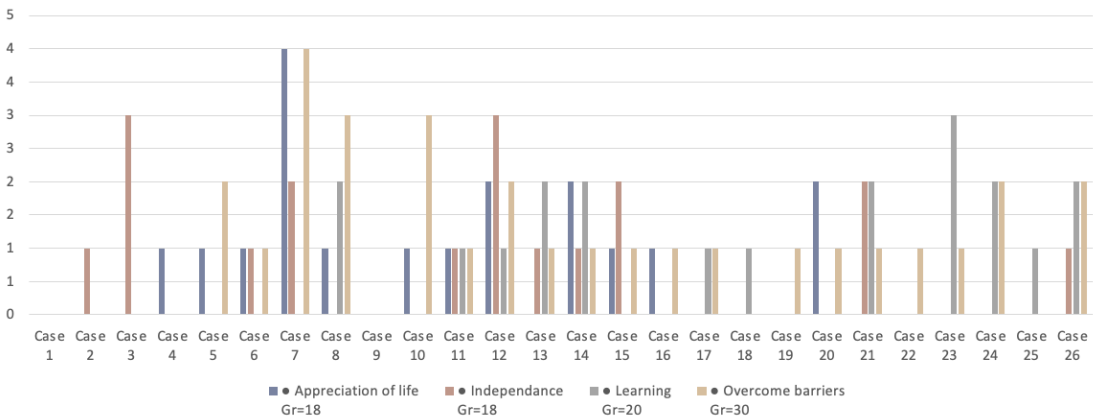


Figure 12. Chart of code occurrences by case

The second theme emerged from various subjective perspectives and circumstances. As the theme is by its very definition personal, so are the subject's particular pressure points for the transformation. Every case has a different set of circumstances, the barrier that is faced could be part of fear, finding value in life, or seeking to achieve something.

Case 7:15 ¶ 17: “I remember walking at one point thinking “This is ridiculous, what am I doing?”. There was a point where I really put a lot of emphasis on how foolish this was... but of course even if it were true, it was already life changing.”

Case 15:1 ¶ 5: “In the summer, was when I began to talk more in class, I made new friends, it was awesome because we were only 7 or 9 people in our class and all of us became really close. That was the first time I made friends by my own.”

Case 26:3 ¶ 9: “Besides making memories I will remember forever, study abroad really pushed me to grow as a person. Each of these excursions pushed my limits of comfort and pushed me mentally (and sometimes physically!). I did not notice a great difference in the moment, but once I came back to the United States, I noticed how much more confident I was. Self-confidence and self-reliance were two of the biggest skills study abroad helped me with since you learn to rely entirely on your own senses and intuition when traveling.”

The motivations behind this theme is primarily comprised of the independence code group. A person feels transformed as a personal trait or circumstance that was seen as an obstacle gets mitigated. However, an interesting finding from narratives is that even though they are centered on personal and individual growth, the transformation is still often triggered and facilitated in relation to other people.

Case 11:2 ¶ 2–4: “I got my own apartment in a new city, I bought my first car, I started a new job, and I travelled to new places. It sounds like a fun and exciting year, right? It was, but those big moments aren’t what defined my year.

The moments from this year that mean the most to me are the little ones. The walks I took to explore my new neighborhood. My best friend dropping off coffee and pastries to me after that marathon I ran. The drives around town with my sisters where we belted out our favorite Taylor Swift and Olivia Rodrigo lyrics. This year I built a life I love, a life I am so extremely proud of. Yes, those major life changes were instrumental in getting me here, but the little moments, the ones that often go unnoticed, those were just as foundational and all the more meaningful.”

Case 6:2 ¶ 2: “where I found my voice again, then had the opportunity to become a musical leader and discovered a joy in helping people find their voice.”

This is an indicator that the first theme is of such relevancy that it has imprinted on other themes as well. In the correlation table, this is evident because the code togetherness correlates very often with overcoming barriers, which is central to this theme of personal challenges.

6 Discussion

The objective of the research was to survey and discover what factors of an experience make it transformational and how it can be of use in tourism. In this chapter, the connection between the analysis results and the theoretical framework will be discussed, and what useful conclusions can be inducted from the study. The final subchapter is a self-reflection as part of the assessment criteria.

6.1 Conclusions

Two conclusions can be made from the findings of this study. Primarily that transformations have a large dependency on interpersonal connections. Transformational experiences have a higher chance of being achieved in relation to other persons.

Of the two strongest emerging themes one is directly related to this conclusion as the theme is centered on a sense of belonging to a group or a bigger-picture movement. The second theme, rising to a personal challenge, does not seem to be dependent on relationships with other people at face value. However, on a thorough inspection of the narratives, it is also evident that even personal growth aspect that defines the transformation is facilitated in connection to others. Even in cases where the personal challenge is regarding individual physical health, the authors contribute the successful transformation to friendships. There are seemingly many aspects that are involved in concepts such as togetherness and friendships. Sometimes it is in the form of empathy and shared struggle, and other times it is like-mindedness that enables the person to remove self-imposed barriers and fears. In context to Maslow's pyramid, the connection made by Taormina and Gao (2013) regarding the correlative effects between needs, could arguably explain the phenomenon. The higher-level need for self-actualization was suffering from the lack of independence caused by barriers perceived in the lower needs for esteem.

The complicated part concerning the tourism industry is reconciling the two important themes of personal challenges and a sense of belonging. The two seem to be opposite yet still linked together as the subjects perceive self-actualization via overcoming personal barriers while involving other people. According to the experience economy framework (Pine & Gilmore 2013), customization is going to be the way to elevate the experience into a transformation. Customization is often thought of as providing customers the possibility to make choices in areas concerning aesthetics and functional options. However, indicated in the results of this study aesthetics are not considered to play any significant role when it comes to transformations. Neither does comfort, as challenges and overcoming them is central in a majority of transformation cases.

What this means for service designers within the tourism industry is that to utilize the next evolution of experiences, the customization focus needs to shift from aesthetics, ease, and function, towards mapping and discovery of individual challenges and overcoming them in groups. The findings of this study suggest that a major indicator of a successful transformation is being a valued part of other people's lives or a bigger-picture movement, and as such provides a clear goal to aim for when designing experiences. Contemporary practical examples of tourism-related experiences with similar results are for example traveling with the purpose of cleaning the oceans and beaches, or volunteering to provide social relief efforts. An example of potential innovation in tourism customization could take the form of niche transformation providers within the adventure tourism industry.

The second important conclusion of this study is the evident lack of diversity when it comes to motivations behind transformational experiences. What we can see in the codes (see figure 9) is that majority of all identifiable motivations from this study are limited to half of the four realms of experience as adapted by Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung (2007). What this is potentially revealing is that even though transformations might be a refined and elevated form of experience, they will not be enough to replace traditional experiences in the tourism industry such as the ones involving aspects of escapism, aesthetics, and entertainment. Transformations are likely to be a niche area of possibilities, and as such less likely to have the disruptive effect traditionally ascribed to the emergence of a new economy, such as the transformation economy predicted in the experience economy framework (Pine & Gilmore 1998).

6.2 Self-reflection

In the process of writing this thesis, I went through something of a transformation myself. I was faced with a big personal barrier of academic writing and understanding research design, and I could not have overcome it by myself. I had to ask for support from friends, family, and my supervisor to be able to get through the process. My motivation was to get through the challenge of graduating ahead of time and gain independence, but the process was facilitated through support from other people.

A key takeaway from my experience of writing this thesis is the importance of putting in extra effort in the research design stage. By having a solid start with good supporting literature, half the battle is won. Spending two extra weeks waiting for a good book from the library that will support in justifying the selected methodology, tools, and approaches rather than searching endless online databases, is worth the wait.

Concerning the topic, what I gained from doing the research was a deeper appreciation of qualitative research and empathizing with people's experiences. Even through the static nature of my secondary data collection, there was a surprising depth to the information available for interpretation in the text. Different layers of personalities and variables to be discovered in the stories told.

Life-changing experiences and transformations are fascinating. There are endless unpredictable variables that contribute to them, like personal history, individual limitations, perceived challenges. Every person is different in how to overcome the challenge and achieve a transformation. Doing business in such an arena would require a whole lot of empathizing research, service design, and UX planning, but in the end, the most important thing to remember is that the key to the transformation business is bringing people together.

Special thanks to everyone that helped me in writing this thesis:

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