An exploratory and qualitative study on the meaning of transformative tourism and its facilitators and inhibitors

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Abstract

While transformative tourism may represent a timely form of tourism conveying hope in an ever-changing world, there is still limited research adopting a demand-side perspective and exploring the understanding and experiences that tourists have about transformative tourism. This paper contributes to fill this research gap by analysing transformative tourism experiences and investigating its characteristics, especially the aspects that facilitate and inhibit tourist transformation. Adopting a qualitative semi-structured interview approach, data was also collected on the nature of wellbeing experienced as result of tourism and how former travellers perceived the impact of transformation in daily life after their return. Overall, interviewees primarily viewed subjective tourist transformation as achieving greater self-efficacy, humility and personal enrichment. Findings suggest that transformation facilitators correspond to: interacting with locals and travellers, facing challenges, experiencing the sense of the place, long stays and post-travel reflection; while several aspects emerged as transformation inhibitors, such as short stays, repeated activities, familiar travel companions and the lack of access to the residents' lifestyle. Participants reported experiencing eudaimonic wellbeing, rather than happiness and hedonia, and discussed the long-lasting effects of their tourist transformation. Managerial and marketing implications are provided, as well as future directions for transformative tourism research.

Keywords: transformative tourism, transformation, tourist experience, wellbeing, facilitators, inhibitors

Introduction

Ever-increasing mobility and migration have now a major role in allowing for more cross-cultural interaction (EU, 2019), revealing the need for travellers to develop tools to understand different perspectives and values across the world. Transformative tourism, as form of tourism leading to "positive change in attitudes and values among those who participate in the tourist experience" (Christie & Mason, 2003, p. 9), may represent a timely vehicle of hope for expanding people's worldview and conveying a greater sense of inclusiveness and belonging to the world (Pritchard et al., 2011).

So far, research has mainly focused on studying the transformative power of specific types of tourism, namely: backpacking (Noy, 2004; Hottola, 2004; Kanning, 2013; Matthews, 2014); Couchsurfing (Decrop et al., 2018); dark tourism (Magee & Gilmore, 2015); extreme sports and survival escapist travel (Reisinger, 2013); folklore tourism (Everett & Parakoottathil, 2016); gap year travel (O'Reilly, 2006); international sojourns (Milstein, 2005; Fordham, 2006; Brown, 2009; Erichsen, 2011; Grabowski et al., 2017); retreat centres visitation (Heintzmann, 2013; Fu et al., 2015); river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993); tourism in protected areas (Wolf et al., 2017); volunteer tourism (Coghlan & Gooch, 2010; Coghlan & Weiler, 2018); wellness tourism (Voigt et al., 2011; Smith, 2013); and WWOOFing (Deville & Wearing, 2013). However, very few studies have been devoted to analyse how transformative tourism experiences are characterised, regardless of tourism type, and provided in-depth information about transformative processes occurring in tourism experiences. Therefore, more research is needed to further understand what characterises transformative tourism.

This paper adopts a qualitative approach and in the exploration of transformative tourism experiences, it also takes into consideration the role and nature of wellbeing, thus responding to Filep and Laing (2019)'s call for investigating the eudaimonic nature of tourist experiences. While existing literature on tourism wellbeing has identified life-changing and long stays as experiences leading to increased tourist quality of life (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004; Neal et al., 2007; Nawijn et al., 2010; Uysal et al., 2016), no study has identified which aspects may facilitate tourist transformation across different types of tourism, as well as those that inhibit it (Reisinger, 2013; Lean et al., 2014). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine subjective transformative tourism experiences, with a focus on exploring which characteristics initiate tourist transformation (facilitators) and which aspects hinder transformative change (inhibitors).

Literature Review

Transformative tourism and tourist wellbeing

In recent years, experience economy, which aims to produce memorable and personalised experiences as whole products (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), has also influenced the tourism sector, underlining the importance tourists assign to immersive and unique experiences (Boswijk et al., 2013). This suggests that tourists as consumers collaborate with operators and suppliers in creating authentic stays and developing meaningful relations in the destination to obtain self-fulfilment (Boswijk et al., 2013; Tussyadiah, 2014; Decrop et al., 2018). As self-fulfilment is now emerging as the primary drive for consumers in selecting and consuming products and experiences, transformative service research has emerged as research strand in the field of marketing and consumer behaviour focusing on transformative services, which have the objective of changing consumers and making improvements to the individual and community wellbeing (Anderson et al., 2013; Anderson & Ostrom, 2015; Blocker & Barrios, 2015; Mende & van Doorn, 2014).

In tourism research, Reisinger (2013) has delved into the connection between tourism and transformational learning, defining travel experiences as journeys of the mind, leading to a greater

concern for humanity and the environment. In fact, in conceptualising transformative tourism meanings, it is sociologist Jack Mezirow's transformational learning theory (1978, 1991) that has mainly been employed by the existing literature (Morgan, 2010; Coghlan & Gooch, 2010; Lean, 2012; Robledo & Batle, 2017; Wolf *et al.*, 2017; Coghlan & Weiler, 2018; Decrop *et al.*, 2018). Transformative learning theory defines transformation as an adult learning process of several steps, initiated by a "disorienting dilemma" challenging established beliefs, and resulting in integrating new perspectives into increased self-awareness (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168-169).

In tourism experiences, transformative learning is believed to occur in the shape of confronting challenges, which intensify an introspective process leading to greater self-understanding (Desforges, 2000; Noy, 2004; Kirillova *et al.*, 2016; Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). New skills and new knowledge are also cultivated during the trip, increasing the tourist's autonomy and self-efficacy (Wearing, 2001; Brown, 2009; Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014; Kakoudakis *et al.*, 2017). In the destination, intercultural competency and cross-cultural awareness may also be developed (Taylor, 1994; Hottola, 2004; Brown, 2009; Mkono, 2016), corresponding to the tourist's acceptance and adaptation to different values and practices, potentially facilitating the tourist's change in perspective and integration of new meanings to daily life and interpersonal relationships after the trip (Taylor, 1994; Brown, 2009; Erichsen, 2011; Lean, 2012; Grabowski *et al.*, 2017; Decrop *et al.*, 2018).

Transformative learning is believed to ultimately influence and change the tourists' behaviour after their return home (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). For example, a different professional attitude may be adopted, such as changing career prospects and the way relationships in the workplace are managed (Inkson & Meyers, 2003; O'Reilly, 2006; Brown, 2009). Furthermore, the adoption of responsible behaviour towards environmental and social issues may take place as a result of the interpretation of tourism attractions and ecotourism programmes (Weaver, 2005; Zahra & McIntosh, 2007; Moscardo, 2017). The transformative tourism meanings built from previous literature and so far discussed, could be perceived as self-flourishing and may positively influence the tourists' wellbeing, making tourist wellbeing a potential outcome of tourist transformation.

In tourism research, tourist wellbeing has been examined from different perspectives. Studies on quality of life have analysed the importance of tourism in influencing overall life satisfaction (e.g. Neal *et al.*, 1999; Richards, 1999; McCabe *et al.*, 2010; Dolnicar *et al.*, 2013; Eusebio & Carneiro, 2014). Tourism as dimension contributing to life satisfaction was found to hold varying relevance according to individuals, as well as within homogeneous segments of travellers (Dolnicar *et al.*, 2013; Eusebio & Carneiro, 2014). In comparing holiday and non-holiday takers, Gilbert and Abdullah (2004) and Nawijn *et al.* (2010) have found that holiday takers experience greater wellbeing in the antecedent phase of the trip. Further, Neal *et al.* (2007) argue that long stays are more beneficial to the positive relationship between satisfaction with tourism services and satisfaction with leisure life. Holidays are also believed to provide a wide range of experiences: Uysal *et al.* (2016) distinguish hedonic and life-changing experiences, in the respectively short and long-term effect they have on the tourists' quality of life.

Tourist happiness has also been conceptualised in terms of subjective wellbeing (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004), a combination of measures of affect and satisfaction with life domains and life in general (Diener *et al.*, 1999, p. 277). However, the use of subjective wellbeing scales to measure tourist happiness has been criticised by Filep and Deery (2010) and Filep (2014), as such scales fail to analyse the narratives and depth of the tourists' narratives and meanings emerging from their subjective experiences. While tourism experiences are considered hedonic as they provide pleasure and enjoyment, the role of eudaimonia (i.e. self-development and personal growth) in the tourist experience and wellbeing has yet

to be deeply examined (Filep & Laing, 2019). As opposed to only experiencing pleasure, eudaimonic wellbeing as personal growth and flourishing also involves introspective questioning and uncomfortable situations (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Keyes & Annas, 2009; Pyke *et al.*, 2016). Adopting a eudaimonic approach, negative affect, challenges and constraints experienced during the trip require further examination to explore their role in the tourist transformation and wellbeing.

Since existing literature supports that the benefits gained from tourism are not permanent (Salazar, 2004; Lean, 2009; Moscardo, 2009), additional research should also be dedicated to explore whether and how transformation through tourism is perceived by individuals in the long term (Kirillova *et al.*, 2016).

Transformation facilitators and inhibitors
While most research on transformative tourism has focused on selected types of tourism and explored their specific transformative processes, Kirillova *et al.* (2016, 2017) investigated what 'triggers' transformative tourism experiences. In their studies, it was found that peak experiences initiate a tourist's existential transformation (Kirillova *et al.*, 2016, 2017). Peak episodes have been described as sudden and meaningful events occurring towards the end of the trip, and characterised by intense emotions and a sense of precariousness, transcendence and connection with nature or a divine figure (McDonald *et al.*, 2009; Kirillova *et al.*, 2017). In the form of an epiphany, peak episodes were found to trigger a major life re-evaluation and the adoption of what the individual considered a more authentic lifestyle and existence (Kirillova *et al.*, 2016, 2017). Beyond identifying peak episodes as triggers of existential transformation, no other transformative tourism study has investigated what may facilitate and what may inhibit tourist transformation. Building on literature exploring tourist attitude change, learning and spiritual experiences, two potential facilitators are also considered in this review: interaction with locals and the sense of place.

While discovering the destination, visitors may perceive a sense of difference and distance between the host culture and theirs (Taylor, 1994). This could lead to a 'cultural disequilibrium', leaving the tourist frustrated while negotiating values and practices that differ from his/her views and behaviour (Taylor, 1994). As Fan *et al.* (2017) note, social contact with locals may have a positive effect on the tourist's perception of cultural distance, as increased social and service-oriented interactions with residents were found to reduce the tourist's cultural shock in the destination. Social interaction between tourists and residents, now also intensified by the advent of sharing economy (e.g. Decrop *et al.*, 2018), is an important factor, not only in reducing the tourist's cultural shock but also in causing attitude change towards the destination (Pizam *et al.*, 1991; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2008). This is further supported by Roberson (2003), who found that interactions with locals, rather than travel companions, contributed to the learning experience of senior travellers. As such, being exposed to the destination residents' lifestyle contributes to self-discovery, cultural learning, and to changing perception of the world and shared values (Adler, 1975; Yu & Lee, 2014). As a result, experiences where visitors have close encounters with locals, have conversations about their stories, and acquire knowledge about their life and practices, are believed to have a great influence in tourist transformation (Milman *et al.*, 1990; Lean, 2009).

Sense of place is also believed to facilitate tourist transformation, as a combination of people, places and landscapes that have physical, functional, affective and existential meaning (Morgan, 2010). Because of the liminoid nature of tourism as extra-ordinary dimension outside everyday life, the destination represents a source of difference, where self-exploration is intensified and existential authenticity can be achieved (Turner, 1969; Andrews, 2009; Pearce, 2010; Brown, 2013; Kirillova *et al.*, 2016; Wearing *et al.*, 2016; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017). The destination has also been described as place constructed by

both the tourists' and locals' consumption through dialogical and embodied performances (Rakić & Chambers, 2012), where tourists have the opportunity to have different roles and relationships, and discover the spectacular and everyday aspects of local life (Rickly-Boyd & Metro-Roland, 2010; Giovanardi *et al.*, 2014). The sense of place of the destination also holds cultural and social meanings (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011), which play a role in the reflexive negotiation and formation of the tourist's identity and agency (Crouch, 2005, p. 18-19; Knudsen *et al.*, 2007). Further, the physical engagement with the environment was also found to heighten the visitors' awareness on a multisensory level, providing feelings of connectedness and place attachment (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; McDonald *et al.*, 2009; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011).

While it is possible to draw potential facilitators of tourist transformation from previous literature, namely peak episodes, interaction with locals and sense of place, existing research has yet to further test their importance and investigate elements in the tourism experience that may inhibit the transformative process. As opposed to experiencing difference and novelty, Gnoth and Matteucci (2014) argue that repeatedly practiced behaviour, such as relaxing in a resort, tends to promote self-consolidation, rather than self-exploration. Therefore, repetitive activity in the destination could represent a potential inhibitor of tourist transformative change, suggesting that further research is needed to test whether repeated behaviour and other factors may be identified as transformation inhibitors, or facilitators.

Methodology

In order to analyse transformative tourism experiences and explore tourist transformation facilitators and inhibitors, this paper adopted a qualitative approach. Qualitative studies are suitable for producing valuable contribution to our understanding of transformative tourism, since exhaustive theoretical knowledge on these experiences is lacking, and further research is still needed to have the conceptual foundations to develop a tourist transformation framework and scale. Participants were selected through non-probability purposive sampling, seeking interviewees with different ages and males and females, to provide heterogeneity of experiences (Patton, 2002; Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). In contrast with Kirillova *et al.* (2016) and Coghlan and Weiler (2018)'s studies, the recruitment for this study did not exclude individuals who had not experienced transformative tourism, as one of the study's main objectives was to investigate tourist transformation inhibitors, and there was therefore a need to also explore why transformation did not occur. Further, the reflective travel phase (i.e. 'after' travel) was chosen as temporal dimension over interviewing tourists at the destination, because the paper aimed at investigating the whole tourism experience and the negotiated meanings of transformation and wellbeing after travel, in accordance with the necessity to evaluate different moments and processes across the antecedent, on-site and reflective phases of the experience (Filep & Deery, 2010; Filep, 2014; Lean, 2012). Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, and the interviews were conducted face to face (10 interviews) and via Skype (3 interviews), with a ranging duration between 20 and 60 minutes. Previous studies focusing on investigating transformative tourism experiences have employed a similar number of interviews (10 by Kirillova *et al.*, 2016; 10 in the case of Coghlan & Weiler, 2018), and Coghlan and Weiler (2018) argue that such limited number of interviews is ideal for focusing on the lived experiences of transformative processes to be understood and delved into. Data saturation was also achieved through 13 interviews due to the final similarity in responses given by the participants on transformation and wellbeing meanings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61; Guest *et al.*, 2006).

The flexible interview protocol consisted of six general questions: the first question aimed at possibly identifying a transformative travel experience to be described by the participant ("Drawing from your experience, could you talk about a past travel experience that you think changed you as a person?").

Further questions were employed to investigate possible factors and characteristics of transformation, such as describing the specific moment when transformation took place, discussing crucial interactions with other people, as well as emotions and meanings that were generated ("When you had this travel experience, were you going through a peculiar/special time of your life?", "Can you describe how you noticed that something was changing? Why do you think this travel experience managed to change you as a person?", "What kind of positive and/or negative emotions were generated by your perceptions of change caused by this travel experience?"). Finally, the participants were required to reflect and elaborate on their happiness and wellbeing after their travel experience, while considering whether their transformation and increased wellbeing were still in place at the time at the interview (i.e. in the long term) ("Did your travel experiences generate a perception of wellbeing and/or happiness in you?", "Can you describe how the changes you experienced have influenced your life?").

In case the interviewees did not recall of having been transformed through travel, they were asked to describe their most enjoyed trip instead, and the interview proceeded with questions about produced meanings, emotions and episodes contributing to their potential wellbeing/happiness. These interviews were considered useful to the end of identifying transformation inhibitors, while the investigation of increased wellbeing as travel outcome remained unmodified. Since this is a post-trip study, a bias in memory formation of the experience (Scott *et al.*, 2017) was expected, but not analysed.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Italy was the location where interviews were conducted. The interviews were entirely transcribed and then translated to English as they were conducted in the interviewees' native language. For the data analysis, the authors initially read the transcripts to familiarise with the data and to clarify any issues arising from the translation of interview data (e.g. lexical, semantic and syntactical problems: Suh *et al.*, 2009) in English. The data were then analysed through thematic coding to identify subjective meanings of the travel experiences, with both open and axial coding. The initial codes were reviewed by the research team, and an independent person revised the coding and decided whether he/she agreed with the codes. Whenever the research team and the independent reviewer disagreed about the adopted coding, discussions were made until an agreement was reached, and the final coding was then undertaken. The emerged themes related to transformation and wellbeing were then matched to constructs built from the literature review.

Results and Discussion
Table 1 provides general information about the profile of the participants who took part in the study. The interviewees were aged 25 to 74; eight were in their 20s and 30s, while five were aged 53 and over. The sample consisted of 8 female participants and 5 male participants; they had different levels of education and professional status, including students, business owners and managers, a chef, a teacher, an office clerk and retired professionals, to have a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of transformative tourism experiences for different people. The interviewees came from Italy; the countries visited in their travel accounts ranged from UK, Italy, Sweden, Spain, Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, Australia, to New Zealand, India, Tunisia and Uganda. As ensured by the sampling choice, the participants had engaged in different numbers of trips (from frequent experiences to occasional short holidays) and in different types of travel, such as student exchange programmes, business trips, leisure trips and spiritual retreats (See Table 1). Nine participants experienced transformative change as a result of tourism experiences, while four participants did not, including two interviewees who during the course of the interview renegotiated their response and revealed perceived transformation. Moreover, some participants felt the necessity to expand their account to more than one experience, arbitrarily comparing between trips and their related different meanings.

Table 1. *Summary of interviewees' characteristics*

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Destination	Stay	Type of Stay	Companions	Trans-formation
ID1	Female	30	New Zealand	Long	Working holiday	None	Yes
ID2	Male	27	Canary Islands	Short	Leisure	Met a friend in destination	No
ID3	Female	56	Switzerland	Short	Health	Partner	Yes
ID4	Female	74	Brazil	Long	Leisure	Friend	Yes
ID5	Female	31	Sweden & London (UK)	Long	Student exchange	None	Yes
ID6	Male	33	Turkey	Short	Leisure	Girlfriend	Yes
ID7	Female	26	Italy	Short	Leisure	Boyfriend & friends	Yes
ID8	Male	65	Many destinations	Short-medium	Work	Local business partners	No -> Yes
ID9	Female	27	Australia & Ngamba Island (Uganda)	Medium-long	Visiting relative	Family	No
ID10	Female	53	India	Short	Spiritual	None	No -> Yes
ID11	Male	30	London	Short	Leisure	Sister & friend	Yes
ID12	Male	25	Australia	Long	Working holiday	Partner	Yes
ID13	Female	27	Hungary	Long	Student exchange	None	Yes

In the following section, the meanings assigned to transformative travel experiences are analysed, especially subjective aspects (i.e. increased self-efficacy, becoming humbler, and being enriched), as perceived by the participants. Then, the analysis proceeds to discuss transformation facilitators (namely, social interaction, challenges, sense of place, long stays and post-travel reflection) and inhibitors (i.e. short stays, repeated practices, lack of access to the residents' lifestyle), and finally explores the impact of transformation and the nature of wellbeing provided by tourism according to the participants. Figure 1 provides a visual aid and conceptual framework of the main concepts and findings, which are discussed in the following section.

Transformative tourism meanings
In describing their experiences of transformative tourism, the main meanings interviewees generally associated with transformation through tourism were the encounter with different people and cultures, general enrichment and an expanded worldview, thus supporting prior studies discussing self-development and cross-cultural awareness as transformative outcomes (e.g. Brown, 2009; Mkono, 2016; Reisinger, 2013). However, when enquired about their subjective transformation, the participants mostly reported experiencing three main changes (discussed below): *increased self-efficacy, becoming humbler* and *being enriched.*

Increased self-efficacy
Greater efficacy in facing challenges represented the interviewees' main change. While visiting the destination, the participants recounted about overcoming challenges, such as learning the local language and managing to communicate with residents, solving problems arising during the stay and negotiating travel plans with the travel companions.
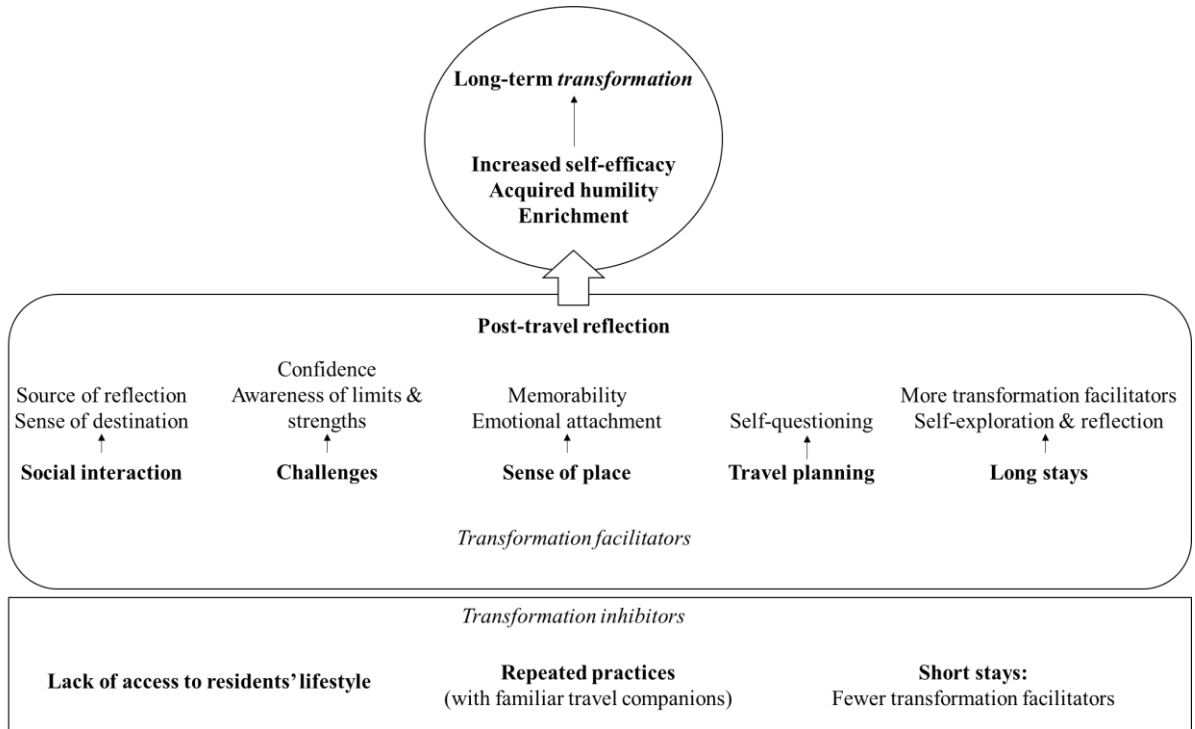
Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of transformative tourism main concepts, as emerged from this study.*

> *Acquiring this ability: at the beginning I thought I wasn't a natural at languages, but then, once [I was] thrown in a context where everyone speaks a language you don't know, you slowly find yourself understanding, comprehending and finally being able to speak... So it was like... Like "I'm also able to speak other languages!" ((laughs)) ...And this happened with learning English, but being in an Erasmus [European student exchange programme] context, it also happened with Spanish, for example (ID5).*

As Brown (2009) notes, a rise in autonomy and self-efficacy can be experienced by international students as a result of facing challenges and distress while studying and staying in a different cultural environment. Defined as developing mastery in managing difficult situations and controlling different life domains as result of holiday breaks (Kakoudakis *et al.*, 2017), self-efficacy was in this study reported to be the main outcome of our participants' transformative tourism experiences, contributing to a heightened sense of self-confidence and self-awareness.

Acquired humility
Another major transformation discussed by interviewees was becoming 'humbler'. Travel experiences taught the participants to be free of pre-concepts and keep an open mind towards different people and contexts according to the destination, sometimes despite common cultural backgrounds. This is exemplified by the following excerpt, where a participant reflected on his wrong assumptions based on his previous stay in the United Kingdom and on the following realisation of a different and complex reality during his working holiday in Australia.

It taught me humility towards other kinds of realities I thought to be simpler, much more, how can I say it... Easier, simpler to analyse, I thought I knew them already, whereas once I found myself in touch with these realities it was much different from what, how I expected. (ID12)

Increased humility as meaning and outcome of transformative tourism has not been yet investigated by existing literature, but may be partially associated with the constructs of developing cross-cultural awareness and intercultural competence, as tourists become more aware and accepting towards the difference in practices and values across cultures and have an enhanced frame of reference (Hanvey, 1982; Taylor, 1994; Brown, 2009; Mkono, 2016). While experienced by fewer participants compared to acquiring humility, several participants also reported a shift in perspective in comparing the locals' lifestyle and interactions in the destination with the participants' home country practices, often resulting in accepting and sometimes appreciating differences. While contradictory at first sight, witnessing the similarity in rituals despite different backgrounds and religious beliefs led some participants to interpret and stress the commonality of mankind, as the following quote suggests.

Religion, extreme religions you encounter, and you ask yourself, Muslims, Hindus, the Ganges is full of people that perform ablutions there, convinced this can bring benefits. You compare it with your religion and you see common aspects. To them it's a sort of confession, a sort of communion, washing in the Ganges to purify themselves from sins. And then you understand that these are needs that men have, they show them in a way or another, the need we have to be freed from sins, from guilt, is common to all men, and this clearly leads you to grow with that mentality and that reasoning. (ID8)

Enrichment
In tourism research, several studies discuss the importance of self-growth as beneficial aspect of travel (e.g. Filep & Deery, 2010; Smith & Diekmann, 2017). Through transformative tourism experiences, travellers discussed a perceived personal enrichment. Being 'enriched' was found to be a broad expression encompassing developing new knowledge and feeling emotions that made the experience unique and memorable, as well as providing the traveller of long-lasting memories. This represented an interviewee's state of mind, in the following extract discussing her attitude towards travelling and recommending it to her friends and family because of its benefits.

But when you mainly have the possibility, even a bit, time- and money-wise, it's good to be enriched thinking of and going on trips. It's a gift for ourselves that doesn't compare. (ID3)

While, in the literature, humility was found to be an outcome of extreme sports tourism (Reisinger, 2013), the themes of achieving humility and enrichment from transformative tourism lacks further analysis by the literature, therefore serving as meanings to be investigated by research studying what tourist transformation entails.

Transformation facilitators
After defining how they personally understood transformation through tourism, the participants proceeded to describe the personal travel experience they considered to be transformative. The aspects of these experiences that often recurred in the participants' descriptions were analysed and interpreted in this study as main facilitators. Our analysis refers to several relevant aspects: *interacting with locals*

and travellers from other countries, facing challenges, experiencing the sense of place, long stays and *post-travel reflection.*

Social interaction
Several interviewees provided accounts of interactions with residents and people of different cultures they encountered in the destination, and these interactions were found to initiate a process of transformation. For example, when comparing his business trip with his holidays, this interviewee mentioned the importance of meeting local colleagues, experiencing their hospitality and witnessing their different practices, not only making him personally invested in the experience but also as means to blend in the destination.

> *When you travel for work, you're on the road like this, you bump into people of all kinds, of all types, continually. And the most beautiful thing is this, relating with them and…accepting them. Because they're often completely different from what you think they say and do. (ID8)*

This particular extract above also seems to contradict Reisinger (2013)'s consideration of business travel as a type of travel that cannot provide transformation, and suggests that by combining leisure activities and informal interactions with the residents, business travel could also hold transformative power. Among the participants, interacting with locals provided a further sense of the destination and sometimes constituted the source of reflection and change of perspective, confirming the importance that existing literature has placed on the role of being exposed to different cultures during tourism experiences (Adler, 1975; Taylor, 1994; Lean, 2009).

> *Travelling and interacting with people living there often means realising the routine the place involves. […] when you talk to members that are present in the social fabric, […] there are more incentives as people know the place where they stay, and they explain the culture in a better way, or some people are quite disillusioned and disappointed at their own reality and they show it, they make you understand the routine and the negative sides of the place where you're staying too. […] meeting with and knowing people from there, Australians, understanding the culture, understanding the city and discovering many little places, many small things, was very important, interesting. It changed me, it taught me humility from my perspective as a person. (ID12)*

Communicating with locals and witnessing moments of their everyday life is viewed as a factor that encourages self-reflection as well as the negotiation of conflicting values (Milman *et al.*, 1990; Roberson, 2003; Yu & Lee, 2014).

Challenges
Interacting with people from different countries in the destination also constituted one of the environmental factors that led interviewees to face challenges, usually found in language barriers and learning ways to communicate with locals and to enjoy their stay. Generally, in their narratives, participants dwelled on issues and problems encountered during the trip, from discovering a mistake in the hotel reservation, clashing with travel companions, to simply finding themselves far from their usual social sphere of support.

> *Travel allows you to face new situations you don't face in daily life, so, in a sense, to be emancipated and grow. All those trips being alone or finding yourself in situations where*

you're not supported by that - group of friends or people that can help you. [...] it's a matter of finding yourself alone in new situations that force you, in a positive and negative way, to know yourself better and so to change too. We were little and the experience was that, despite having paid everything for the hotel, we arrive and the guy tells us that the room wasn't booked. And I couldn't speak, I wasn't very confident in speaking English well, and I was the only one who had the courage to be able to do it. And, well, I then solved everything but it was moments of terror, you know ((laughs)). In another country, alone, young, with two people who didn't speak the language well and that were very afraid because they didn't understand anything. So then I said "Yes, I can do it. I can solve a booking at a hotel". (ID11)

In transformative tourism research, challenges have been found to lead individuals to develop personal development and cultural adaptation in volunteer tourism and study abroad experiences (Wearing, 2001; Fordham, 2006; Gill, 2007; Brown, 2009; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017), and in our findings they characterised indeed study abroad, but also other experiences, ranging from short trips to business travel. These challenges were followed by the participants gradually gaining courage and finding solutions, showing other people and especially themselves how they were able to overcome fears and adapt for survival and a better experience. For example, an interviewee found herself to become stronger and ready to face unpredicted events during her travels trips in Northern Italy.

This was clearly a big step forward for me as I was very shy and introverted, to manage in...different things, not only while travelling, but [becoming] a little more alert ((snaps fingers)), resourceful in all things, because clearly if you have to travel you have to get it together, otherwise, bye-bye! (ID7)

In general, these challenges led the participants to be more aware of their limits and strengths, as well as to be more confident in what would have seemed unforeseen situations.

Sense of place
Besides social interaction and challenges, the destination's sense of place had the transformative power to convey strong emotions and new meanings to the participants. For one interviewee, visiting Istanbul represented more than his first holiday abroad, it became a multi-sensorial experience made up by the urban environment and the contradicting practices. The novelty and cultural contradictions were particularly felt as a way to escape ordinary life, to erase pre-assumptions about life outside Europe, while absorbing beauty and learning about a new reality.

Diving into a world that's like ours, on one hand, meaning that it comes from European culture, but also comes from a different culture, the Arab culture, and this is very much felt, you strongly feel the weight of work, [...] of communication, even just the fact of the singing at dawn, of the prayer from Hagia Sophia at dawn, or from the different mosques. [...] While we crossed areas, nearby boroughs, where the weight of religion gradually got stronger, almost in an exponential way, the more you moved from the centre, the more you felt the influence of religion and tradition, and that was the journey inside the journey: discovering a part of the city that was a few kilometres from the centre, and I would have never imagined this... that makes you immerse in a world that's not yours and that makes you personally see [...] going back and analysing what has been at a kilometres distance, after a while. And you then realise that there's something different, in the way I relate to the place, to the people too, to everything. (ID6)

This excerpt provides an example of how locals may share their environment with tourists and play an effective role in providing a transformative sense of place (e.g. Rickly-Boyd & Metro-Roland, 2010; Rakić & Chambers, 2012; Giovanardi *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, this finding enhances our understanding on how the destination setting, experienced through the tourists' senses, has the potential to not only develop place attachment (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; McDonald *et al.*, 2009; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011), but also leave a strong impact on memory and facilitate tourist transformation.

Long stays
In general, transformation seemed to require some time for the previous tourists to (self-)explore and notice underlying meanings during the visit to a destination. Therefore, it was found that long stays provided the participants with more sources for reflection and involving more of what we considered to be transformation facilitators in the destination (e.g. social engagement with travellers and residents, and challenges). In the following interview extract, a participant described the gradual acquaintance with a lesbian couple of travellers escaping China and trying to settle in New Zealand, which she realised during the interview was a meaningful part of her one-year long working holiday.

> *I spent 11 months in New Zealand [...] I guess that's the time I gradually realised, for me it was to know more about LGBT people. They left China because it's a very traditional place where they don't accept these things. [...] New Zealand is a place where they accepted LGBT marriage by that time. They went there and prepared everything so they could be recognised by that country, so they could be legal and official partners. I enjoyed their company, I witnessed how people care about each other, support each other even though they suffer, you know, they have families in China, they cannot tell who they are to their parents. And they continued to make a living, find a job, and try to get a permanent residence there, so they could stay there and get a better life. That was the time I felt everyone has their own problems, what I worry about all day is not to at the same level as they worry about. (ID1)*

This suggests that transformation may more likely occur when cultural differences between visitors and locals are particularly pronounced and prolonged (e.g. Christie & Mason, 2003, p. 1). Overall, the finding seems to confirm the literature's assumption that longer journeys and considerable lengths of time away from home will more likely cause the individual to undergo transformation (e.g. Kottler, 1997).

Peak episodes / post-travel reflection
When asked about how and when they noticed that transformation had occurred, the majority of participants reported that they did not realise it during the experience, but rather made sense of the transformation after the trip and perceived it as the result of several events and introspective processes.

> *I think I sort of started being more aware of things after high school, after university or during university, that's what I would tie it too. But on the other hand I would also say there's not a specific time [I noticed change] because I've always grown up travelling [...]. So I don't think it's been like, it's not like all of a sudden I'm paying attention to these things, it's been a gradual thing, awareness. (ID9)*

> *I realized that something changed when the people close to me talked about elements, things of which I had never even heard. [...] I didn't realise it in that moment, I realised it thinking about it later. They are all things one realises later, I think, it's not something we can tell while it's occurring, because experiences are often not well analysed by our brain while we're still travelling. (ID12)*

The lack of specific moments triggering the transformation or sudden revelations in our analysis contradicts Kirillova *et al.* (2016)'s consideration of peak episodes as necessary epiphanies or serendipitous episodes that need to occur towards the end of the trip to facilitate existential transformation.

Instead, without being asked, participants shared their opinion of what a tourist would need to have and experience transformation: a certain number of trips, a flexible mind-set and post-travel reflection.

> *You need several trips to transform, you need to see a lot of things to be able to see, to understand specific things or to change point of view, because I think that this depends on how much you move, from where you depart, what you want to see and so, that's basically what transforms you as a person, I think... [...] and if one manages to do this repetitively and continually, I think so. (ID2)*

Time and reflection after the interviewees returned home were considered fundamental to 'metabolise' and process their transformation (Lean, 2009), to then being able to describe it. Further, two interviewees initially reported no transformation undergone, but while recounting their memorable experiences, they slowly identified personal growth and several changes in their attitudes. Therefore, this study also confirms the importance of interviews, narration and storytelling for tourists to reflect on the impact of transformative tourism (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018), as the participants grew more aware of their transformation by narrating their experiences through stories and in-depth narratives.

Transformation inhibitors
Based on the analysis of tourism experiences that participants described as not being transformative, it was found that several elements hindered the start of a transformative process, namely: short stays, repeated practices and the lack of access to the residents' lifestyle. These were considered transformation inhibitors.

While Lean (2009, 2012) challenged the correlation between trip duration and transformation, our study found that short trips presented fewer transformation facilitators compared to long stays. Repetitive activities, such as sightseeing, short tours and nightlife activities were also found not to stimulate reflection or transformation. This was especially true when the tourists travelled with familiar travel companions (e.g. family, friends, partner) and if they were not able to experience social interactions with the residents.

> *Yes, I was with [...] my boyfriend. We were with another friends couple. The trip lasted two days. We went to Genoa because there was a concert ((laughs)), okay, sorry, it was a metal concert and I fell asleep in the front row [...] We went around the city in its little streets, we saw many traditional small shops, the traditional gastronomy and... The trip didn't last much ((laughs)). In that case. [...] Going to Milan, then going to do internships, going to visit someone else who was near Milan, I opened myself up. (ID7)*

> *A short while ago I've been to London, still visiting a friend that lives and works there and I haven't had many interactions with local residents, with Londoners or English people in general. Because I went out with my friend or with her colleagues who were not English, but Italian, Spanish, Thai and so on. [...] But on a personal relationship level it certainly didn't struck me like it happened in the Canary Islands. [...] The Canary Islands were different*

because I didn't know what to expect, maybe I didn't know the place as well as I knew London, so finding that kind of world with its specific features struck me more. (ID2)

This finding may further support Gnoth and Matteucci (2014)'s consideration of repetitive activities in tourism as a crucial component of self-consolidation and re-discovery, as opposed to exploration and transformative activities, while short stays and familiar travel companions may further characterise a tourism experience without transformative outcomes.

Tourist wellbeing and transformation longevity
Eudaimonic meaning
Based on the analysis of the narratives provided and the meanings assigned by the participants, their increase in wellbeing was defined as fulfilment, satisfied curiosity, wonder and learning, therefore corresponding to eudaimonia, rather than hedonic meanings and happiness (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2001; Keyes & Annas, 2009; Pyke *et al.*, 2016). When asked about achieving happiness through tourism, a number of interviewees took more time to reflect on their travel experiences and questioned the meaning of happiness, often expanding the discourse with their personal meanings of self-development. As Filep (2014) deemed subjective wellbeing to be an unsatisfying measure of tourist happiness and has called for the analysis of meaningful experiences, the same perspective was also expressed in the response of our participants.

There were some instances where after the trip I felt happy... But I'm not sure, I'm not convinced I would use that as a word. That's not the first word that I would think of. [...] You feel so lucky, not everybody gets to do that. It's the kind of things you do once in a lifetime. I feel, like, that much richer. (ID9)

I think I've never gone on trips where I haven't had fun or I haven't been well. Or where I haven't found benefits for the long term. Even if the trip in itself wasn't particularly enthusing, it was an experience from which I gained positive lessons. (ID11)

Like eudaimonia, fulfilment and enrichment characterised both the interviewees' positive and negative experiences. Further, the identification of facing and overcoming challenges as transformation facilitator may stress the importance of experiencing negative and unexpected situations to grow and become better equipped for future travel complications or everyday-life constraints.

Increased wellbeing across the experience
Compared to transformation, which sometimes was not experienced or detected, greater wellbeing was always an acknowledged outcome of tourism. On the whole, participants perceived increased wellbeing prior the departure, during and after the trip. Travel planning itself was found to be a recurring phase in which interviewees felt excited and happy.

Even just the idea of travelling and planning it. We're travelling again and I already planned everything ((laughs)). Even being there, reading the travel guide, reading... finding a place where to stay overnight, seeing the routes to take, having a first approach with the place, seeing the images of the place while you don't know how it is yet: it puts you in a good mood. Because you're getting ready to discover, to go to see new things, so yes, wellbeing, absolutely, because you're carefree, you're cheerful, you are indeed having a leisure trip... (ID5)

This finding seems to further suggest that holiday takers particularly experience greater wellbeing in the antecedent phase of the trip (Nawijn *et al.*, 2010; Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004).

With regard to the actual longevity of transformation and increased wellbeing obtained from the tourism experience, most participants felt their personal changes and realisations still had effects at the time of the interview. For some, their transformation was permanent due to a number of aspects, such as the great strength of emotions experienced, or travelling more and further expanding their worldview.

> *Permanently, definitely. So, it's a permanent change because it taught me and it made me understand that to comprehend the situations and to comprehend any person you have to be there to judge it, you can't judge it from your comfortable chair. (ID12)*

> *Well... I think it's just a growth process that goes through your life. Somebody who's always done a lot of travelling, and I think the more places you go to, the more exotic places, the more different, the more challenging things you do, the more exposure it just gives you over time, as to what you gain and what you learn from the travel, but it's always there and it's always moving forward. [...] With WhatsApp and what not, and the TV... You get to see and learn so much without going and experiencing, but in the end there's nothing like first-hand experience, and that's what you get when you travel. The other thing that travel does is, it just shows you that there are so many other options and so many other ways of doing things. And that makes you a more flexible and broad-minded person... (ID10)*

This result contradicts the previous studies' understanding of transformation as tourism activities only causing temporary changes (Salazar, 2004, Lean, 2009; Moscardo, 2009), and supports that transformation may last over time, through narrating these experiences and reflecting on personal changes.

Conclusion
This study aimed to analyse the meanings and characteristics travellers assign to transformative tourism, and to investigate transformation facilitators and inhibitors, while exploring the relation between tourist transformation and wellbeing.

Our findings expand our limited understanding on how transformative tourism experiences are characterised and how tourist transformation and wellbeing are perceived by travellers. As result of their experience, participants described their subjective tourist transformation as achieving greater self-efficacy, humility and enrichment. Several factors were identified as facilitating transformation, namely: interacting with residents and other travellers, experiencing the sense of place, overcoming challenges, long stays and post-travel reflection. Short stays, repeated practices and the lack of access to the residents' lifestyle emerged as transformation inhibitors. In this study, the occurrence of peak episodes or epiphanies (Kirillova *et al.*, 2016) was not found to play a central role in initiating transformation, while importance was placed in post-travel reflection (Aho, 2001; Coghlan & Weiler, 2018) to make sense of the transformative experience as a combination of different facilitators and processes. Further, this paper further showed that, in any tourism type engaged, increased wellbeing was perceived by all participants and considered to hold eudaimonic meanings rather than pure pleasure. In the findings, compared to wellbeing, transformation was more problematic to be detected and discussed by the interviewees: not all participants reported experiencing transformative change through tourism, meaning that tourist transformation requires certain facilitators (above described) to occur. This

disputed the idea of wellbeing as outcome of transformative tourism experiences, and confirmed that not all travel experiences are transformative. However, when transformation emerged, it was believed to be permanent and long-lasting, contradicting the literature's assumption that transformative travel benefits are only short-lived (Salazar, 2004, Lean, 2009; Moscardo, 2009).

From a practical perspective, our study provides insights on how to develop transformative tourism products. By discussing tourist transformation characteristics, facilitators and inhibitors, it contributes to the limited understanding of transformative tourism experiences, which comprise different facilitators, activities and outcomes, that could be purposefully designed and delivered. Specifically, this study suggests that tourism organisations should enhance the experience of travel planning, so increased wellbeing and self-evaluation can be further built prior to travel. This could be done by encouraging the traveller to research the chosen destination via social media platforms to gather information about local identities and practices, and by also shaping local volunteer communities that prepare the traveller for the experience by sharing highlights and knowledge on destination lifestyles and environments. Since the exposure to locals and people from different countries proved to have an important role in developing the tourists' adaptation skills, confidence and self-awareness, travellers should also be provided with frequent opportunities to engage with the destination community and fellow travellers, especially during short stays where transformation can be inhibited by the limited available time. The sense of place could also be further developed by destination management bodies, with marketing strategies aimed at strengthening the uniqueness of the cultural and environmental assets, as well as involving residents with beneficial initiatives showcasing their traditions. All these conditions would purposefully facilitate the travellers' transformation, increasing their self-efficacy, humility and enrichment, and would also contribute to their eudaimonic wellbeing, with a potential greater impact on society. Finally, communication channels stimulating the reminiscence and recollection of transformative experiences could improve the longevity of transformation, which in this study was found to be achievable. This could consist of platforms, such as sensorial staging and ad-hoc blogs, where individuals could participate post travel, recollecting and enhancing their transformative tourism experiences.

Despite its contributions and implications, this paper includes several limitations. The sample exclusively interviewed Italian respondents, so future studies could employ a cross-cultural investigation of how transformative experiences, including facilitators and inhibitors, differ according to the tourist's cultural background (Lean, 2012). Further, while most studies on transformative tourism have analysed specific types of tourism activities, more research is particularly recommended to further understand the meaning of tourist transformation and what type of transformation may be conveyed according to experience, so that operators would be more knowledgeable in designing different transformative tourism experiences. Furthermore, this study did not try to investigate what is the extent of change that it is needed to characterise tourist transformation (e.g. in terms of time, depth of change, etc.): these aspects would merit attention in future studies. Since our study used a qualitative approach and found that tourist transformation may be long-lasting, a longitudinal approach employing innovative tools could monitor travel experiences over time, to better understand which factors increase the lifespan of transformation (Reisinger, 2013), and how they may influence the tourist wellbeing.

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