Transformative Tourism as a Mean of Region's Sustainable Development

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Abstract Transformational tourism opens new opportunities for travel companies and recovering tourism industry in the period of pandemic and restrictions. Despite this constrains, travelers are looking for new ways of traveling and getting impressions. Transformative tourism aims to expand the vision of familiar things and rediscover them, sometimes even making changes in tourist attitudes and beliefs. This article goal is to show possibilities of transformative tourism as a tool to overcome the crises in the tourism industry for sustainable regions' development. Based on transformative tourists experience in Russia, South Africa and Turkey, content analysis of feedbacks, qualitative and quantitative research, we have discovered great potential for the travel industry recovery by means of the transformative tourism: preservation of the region's heritage and nature, support of SMEs, increasing interest to local cultures, improving the place image, create a tolerance to different cultures and nations, shape respect for the environment and nature, foster personal development. The article will be interesting for municipal leaders, travel companies and researchers.

Keywords Transformative tourism · Sustainability · Regional tourism

JEL Classifications Z31 · Z32

1 Introduction

Currently, there are quite a lot of publications on the search for ways to survive travel companies during the pandemic and political crises (Varzaru et al., 2021; Abbas et al., 2021; Sheresheva et al., 2021). One of these opportunities is transformational tourism. The first publications on the topic appeared relatively recently, and transformational tourism is gaining popularity both among researchers (Ateljevic, 2020; Pung et al, 2020) and among the offers of travel companies. Many tourists prefer non-traditional

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travel destinations, and they are looking for new experiences, new knowledge, new travel opportunities (Ateljevic et al., 2016; Kirilova et al., 2017; Sheldon, 2020), such as to take a break from the hustle and bustle of the city, stay in nature, reduce stress, discover something new for themselves. According to the Transformational Travel Council (2021), transformational journey is a way to learn, grow and interact with the world. Travel can change a person's outlook on life and change their knowledge, values, attitudes, behavior, as well as how people spend their time and use resources (Sheldon, 2020).

In this article, author defines transformational tourism as a journey to find new cultural and spiritual experiences, discover the world for yourself, immerse yourself in the local culture and lifestyle of other people. For transformational travel, in addition to a uniqueness of place, people a tourist meets are also important, their willingness to openly talk about their culture and way of life. Other factors like co-travelers (travel partners), personal characteristics of traveler, opportunity to immerse in local culture are also important. The result of such a trip is that each participant should become the best version of himself.

The leading travel agencies and hotels (e.g., Marriot) are working on the possibility of organizing transformational trips, opening organic and vegetable gardens, various culinary studios and art workshops where you can do something with your own hands, personal trainers and yoga instructors. For example, The Ritz-Carlton and St. Regis Hotels and Resorts in 2018 offer their clients who want to experience a transformational travel experience to choose tours to the hidden places of Los Cabos (Mexico), Cairo (Egypt) and Amman (Jordan).

Despite the relevance of transformational tourism, there is still a relatively small amount of research about the possibility of transformational tourism to influence the sustainable development of the world and regions, thus, the purpose of the article is to show the possibilities of transformative tourism as a mean for sustainable regions' development through the analysis of the travelers' experience in Turkey, South Africa and Russia.

The main research question is whether transformational tourism can become a reliable support and inexhaustible source for the development of regions, travel companies, that is able to overcome the crisis of the tourism industry and meet the growing demand for transformational travel services from tourists.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Definition, Effects and Types of Transformative Tourism

The term first appeared in the academic discourse by Kottler (1997), who stressed that traveling gives a lot of opportunities for personal change and mention its transformative effect on tourists. UNWTO (2016) mentions that transformative tourism gives opportunity to travelers "to re-invent themselves in the world". Nowadays

transformative tourism is a widely spread concept and its definition has been deepened and expanded. Transformational Travel Council (2021) defines transformation travel as "a deliberate journey to expand, learn and develop new ways of existing and interacting with the world". This definition emphasizes the distinctive feature of this type of travel—the search for new opportunities for self-knowledge and the world. Kirillova, Letho & Cai (2017) mention that transformative experiences are "those special extraordinary events that do not only trigger highly emotional responses but also lead to self-exploration, serve as a vehicle for profound intrapersonal changes, and are conductive to optimal human functioning" (2017, p. 498). Another definition was given by Tomljenovic and Ateljevic (2015, p.14) "transformative tourism is a type of tourism where tourists participate in travel that offers a high level of immersion with the host culture". So, the transformation can only happen if there is interconnection and openness between traveler and local people. Noy (2004) stressed that transformation is positive self-change of a person because of intentional and unintentional interactions between traveler and destination.

Morgan (2010) reveals factors that important to transformation: nature, culture, characteristics of the destination, traveler's personal motivation, intentional or unintentional forms of experience, duration of travel (long or short term) and distance (both physical and cultural) also affect the intensity of transformation. Pung & Del Chiappa (2020) also identified a set of essential characteristics for a deep transformation effect: interacting with locals and other tourists, facing challenges, experience the sense of place, long-stays and post-travel reflection. Pine & Gilmore (2011) mentioned individuals' personal backgrounds, events, perceptions and interactions at the destination as crucial factors for transformation tourism. However, Kirillova et al. (2017) proposed that the transformative effect does not lie in the nature of the tour or in the environmental factors, but in the way the tourist perceives those experiences and gives them meaning. Tasci and Godovykh (2021) revealed that travelers change more when they have contact with nature and people and participate in cultural activities. Cultural background and personal characteristics of the tourist might also affect the intensity of transformation (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016).

Transformational tourism attracts the attention of not only researchers, but also practitioners. Melo et al (2021) made content analysis of websites of travel agencies published as partners in the Transformational Travel Council webpage (www.transformational.travel). The most common types of companies that were mentioned are travel experiences, followed by the life and travel coaches and retreat companies. Most frequent categories that were detected in tours description are: process (transformation), experience, traveler characteristics and context (place or environment).

Different types of transformative trips also were identified from theoretical and field research: backpacking tourism, education, tourism, ecotourism, extreme sports, yoga and other spiritual practices tourism, creative tourism, cultural tourism, spiritual, religious tourism, volunteer tourism, WWOOF-ing (agricultural tourism), health (wellness) tourism , gastronomic, sightseeing and immersion in culture, retreat tourism (Melo et al, 2021).

2.2 *Transformational Tourism as an Opportunity for Regions' Sustainable Development*

The benefits of transformative experiences for the tourism industry, travel agencies and individuals were mentioned in the UNWTO report (UNWTO, 2016). The report notes that with current environmental problems, tourism can become an important aspect of preserving cultural heritage, the unique nature of the regions, thanks to a new type of travelers who lead a conscious lifestyle.

The previous development of tourism industry has led to over-tourism, over-pollution and over-consumption (Sheldon, 2020) in the most popular travel destination. In several regions, it has led to the destruction of a unique ecology (lake Baikal), causing significant damage to cultural heritage (one can easily recall the Great Wall of China), discontent of the local population (Easter Island, etc.).

Transformative tourism, according to a number of researchers, has the potential to make the world a better place (Ateljevic, 2020). Transformational tourism can help overcome the emerging crises in the tourism industry thanks to the following characteristics:

- Transformative tourism experiences facilitate understanding of different cultures, developing a more tolerant and universal worldview. Travelers accept easily other countries representatives and culture (Brown, 2009). For example, Pung and Del Chiappa (2020) found that Italian travelers learned to be non-judgmental toward others (people or situations) through transformative experiences during their trips.
- Being in such travel stimulates self-reflection, critical thinking, emotional connections, that leads to personal development (Soulard et al., 2020).
- Transformative tourism showing uniqueness of nature, foster responsibility, and a more careful attitude to the environment. Tasci & Godovykh (2021) proved that transformative travelers become more environmentally conscious after tour.
- Transformative tourism can even change the tolerance to warring nations. For example, Pizam et al. (2002) found more positive perception of Jordanian people by Israelis after their eco-traveling tour to Jordan. These attitudinal changes are claimed to serve world peace (Bruner, 1991).
- Transformative model of tourism can preserve the local heritage and nature (UNWTO, 2016).
- Small- and medium-sized enterprises are the main actors in transformative tourism because only they can create unique tours with a meeting with original people for the small groups of tourists. Transformative tourism opens wide opportunities for them, that can increasing workplaces and tax revenues.
- Creation of new transformative tours can lead to improving the city or place image and attracts new tourists to the territory.

Thus, transformational tourism has a number of features that can lead to a more sustainable development of regions: the preservation of their natural resources, the maintenance of cultural heritage, attracting attention to unique entrepreneurs and

craftsmen working on the territory, attracting additional funds, stimulating small-and medium-sized enterprises.

Of course, the capabilities of the world's leading countries are extensive in preserving their natural resources and cultural heritage. We are also interested in whether transformational tourism can increase opportunities for sustainable development in developing economies. To do this, we will analyze the experience of Turkey and Africa, and then explore the experience of Russia.

2.3 Transformative Tourism Experience in Turkey

Pale and Settings (2021) based on the experience of Turkish travelers investigated the factors influencing the transformational experience. Using semi-structured interviews, they studied travelers who had been abroad more than three times in the past two years. By studying the changes that travelers noticed in themselves, they identified factors that influence the beliefs and behaviors of tourists and the change in their daily lives.

The author investigated tripographic factors (e.g., length of travel), personal characteristics (e.g., cultural background) and destination features (e.g., cultural distance). Types of transformations were also categorized under three groups: behavioral, attitudinal and personality changes. Motivation, duration of the trip, co-travelers, organization of the trip, type of planning, cost of the trip and type of accommodation were identified as the main topics within the tripographic factors. Personal characteristics: demographic factors, personality traits, previous tourist experience, place of residence and nationality were marked by factors affecting the depth of transformational experience. The distance to place of travel, the language, the level of interaction and the characteristics of the destination (history, heritage, customs and people) also influenced the transformations. This effect can be caused by material factors such as landscape, nature, infrastructure and architecture, or by intangible factors such as culture, values, lifestyle, relationships and cost of living.

Pala and Cetin (2021) found that nature-based travel experiences lead to environmental awareness, behavioral change, self-actualization, personal development, sociocultural alterations and improved health and well-being in a nature-based tourism setting.

2.4 Transformative Tourism in South Africa

The study by Mkhize and Ivanovic (2020) was also based on a qualitative method—interviewing international tourists who visited Soweto in the period 3 January to 30 March 2018. The authors asked about the experience of tourists when walking through the township; living as the locals do; and dining with the locals. The authors identified the following factors that have a greater impact on the transformational

experience of travelers: cultural and historical interest, education, conviction in environmental and social justice, the values of the traveler, the desire for authenticity. Guided by their conscience, some tourists demonstrate self-limiting and responsible tourist behavior that reflects their social and moral principles, as well as life values.

The authors also noted that a new type of tourists is looking for highly personalized, independent type of travel and avoid pre-planned popular commercial tours. They are looking for opportunities to meet and talk with residents, to get to know the city, the possibility to experience deep immersion in the environment and gain life experience.

The interviewed respondents in this study expressed a need for a "live like a local" experience. There is a need to eat what the locals and do what a local would do rather than visit the overwhelmed restaurant or to stay in a hotel.

Authors came to the conclusion that the more such travelers will appear, the more locals will be encouraged to save and promote their local heritage and extend personal knowledge about native culture in order to meet the demand of foreigners. However, development of the tourism should not damage the local culture, and government should establish an open dialog with the locals aligned with the principles of responsible tourism. Transformative tourism by the view of Mkhize and Ivanovic (2020) can set a new trajectory toward sustainable post pandemic world and make this type of tourism a dominant type of travel.

Now let us move to the experience of Russian travelers.

3   Methodology

The study was conducted in the period 2021–2022. The object of the study was the tourists of a transformational travel company. In order to make sure that the selected company really provides services in the field of transformational tourism, and not just declares about it, we conducted an interview with the owner of the company, a leading guide, three travelers and also got acquainted with travelers' feedback on the company's website. Based on the information received, we came to the conclusion that the chosen company Glukhoman-Go (possible translation backwoods-go) corresponds to the transformational model of tourism. In the period December 2021, 7 interviews were conducted: with the owner, with the leading guide, with three clients, as well as with two destination-based agents (cheese factory, Gzhel crafts). In the company's communication channels (Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp) for the period from 2020 to 2022 years 32 reviews were selected, where travelers shared their experiences and the transformational effect that travel had on them, and not just gratitude for the tour. Since the information received was insufficient from the point of view of studying the intensity of the transformational experience and the factors that influenced it, we launched a questionnaire among the participants of the tours in June 2022. Although there is not much data at the moment (there are only 20 answers), it is possible to make only general conclusions in the form of assumptions. The questionnaire was limited to 15 questions, because that was the request of the

travel company. The CEO mentioned that questionnaire should not be too long and difficult, as it can affect the attitude of tourists.

Thematic content analysis was applied to analyze the data from reviews and interviews. The author shared transcription with colleagues who independently categorize the variables. Based on the thematic content analysis, several keywords that affect transformative travel experiences were revealed: personal characteristics, co-travelers, local people, places of visits and destination-based agents, who are ready to share their experience in different fields such as making cheese, sheep rearing, preservation of cultural heritage (collection of platbands), developing of crafts (Gzhel), people who take care of nature and know unique places to visit (Dagestan). Feedback overview was also made with the help of content analysis and frequency analysis. The amount of data obtained during the questionnaire survey is still too small to use complex methods of data analysis, that is why received outcomes require further verification.

4 Results

The results of the analysis of reviews showed that the most common topics are the place of travel, admiration for local agents, deep emotions experienced by tourists (some tourists said that were in fairy tale or a dream), gratitude to the organizers for unique tours and transformational effects that the trip had. Co-travelers, the novelty of knowledge, the expansion of horizons that travelers felt were also often noted. The number of mentions can be seen on Fig.1.

According to earlier researchers, we can also see such factors as deep emotions, transformational effect, description of the place of travel, expansion of horizons and novelty of the acquired knowledge. But there is a high frequency of answers about importance of co-travelers and gratitude to them. In our study, an important factor is
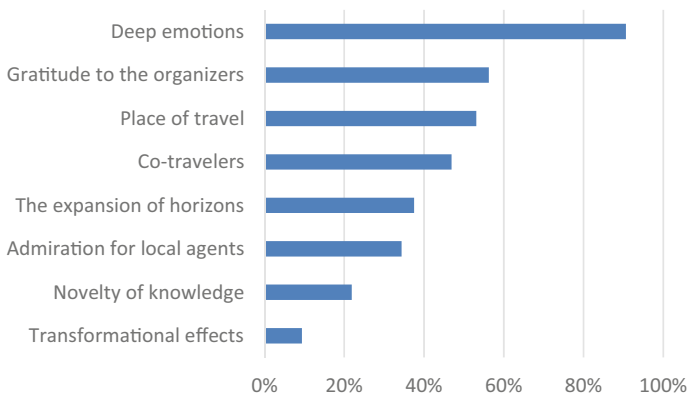

Fig. 1 Frequency analysis of the mentioned words in the feedbacks to tours

also the fascination of local agents. For example, phrases such as "they fall in love with what they are doing", <they> "leave a bright mark in everyone's heart".

In response to the question how much the trip affected you and your initial view of the place of travel, 85% of tourists replied that the effect is significant. At the same time, 65% replied that they were energized by the tour participants, guides, and 10% that they completely changed their perception of the place of travel.

In interview with tourists also the deep feelings that they received from excursions to local agents and people were mentioned: "The people who tell you, they reveal some secret to you, they are not just guides, they are those who want to convey to you all their love that they have for this place, for this business. You may not know some dates, etc., but you become one of them" (female, 41).

As for the co-travelers, people mention that they are not just individual participants in the tour, but "from the very beginning of the journey, you immediately plunge into some kind of unifying process" (female, 41). "There is an element of networking in trips, when we all participate in a challenge, everyone pollinates each other, and these people are usually very interesting. They are non-serial travelers" (male, 40).

The reasons why the participants chose the company for transformational tourism: unusual travel, non-standard tours, unique places, immersion in the lives of other people, a different reality, the opportunity to touch everything with their hands, affordable prices, spontaneity of decisions that are made, impressions that cannot be obtained independently, responsiveness of the organizers, a great travel partners, the opportunity to feel personal uniqueness and get new experiences, a small group of travelers.

For the revealing possibilities of transformational tourism for the sustainable development of regions, we have asked local agents (the head of the unique Gzhel Sea project—dishes with hand-painted authentic paintings and the head of the cheese factory) about their view on the topic. Each of them presents a unique project that is the love of their whole life, and they are ready to talk about it for very long and share their experience with others. They see the preservation of cultural heritage as their personal goal, e.g., "our goal is popularization of the development of Gzhel majolica and preservation of historical heritage. We carry out an educational function and promote projects on the territory of Gzhel, foster the popularization of Majolica" (male, 48). The main motivation for their participation in travel project is intangible benefits—to interest people in what they are doing, share their passion, find the supporters. At the same time, they say that such trips are not a mass product, and it does not bring much income but requires a lot of time and effort: "Physically, it is very difficult, I would not conduct author tours often. The places I show are unconventional, e.g., we organize events with artists who are not always ready to talk to tourists" (male, 48).

Summarizing the obtained results, we can see common features in the behavior patterns of transformative tourism travelers in Turkey, Africa and Russia. These tourists are looking for a unique travel experience that will allow them to see common things in a new way, to become netter version of themselves, they try to feel deep immersion in the local culture, to talk to interesting people in places of travel. Our research additionally revealed the high importance of such a factor as co-travelers,

who make trips even more unforgettable and with whom they can share received experience. In addition, interviews with local agents showed that they are primarily motivated by intangible benefits such as recognition and preservation of cultural heritage. Each tour is unique for them, and they believe that this type of travel product cannot be mass produced, because in this case, authenticity will be lost.

5 Conclusion

In this study, we have studied the possibilities of transformational tourism to achieve the goals of sustainable development of territories. The following characteristics of transformational tourism contribute to sustainable development: tolerance to different cultures and nations, preservation of the local heritage and nature, extend the worldview, personal development through self-reflection, critical thinking, emotional connections, foster responsibility and a more careful attitude to the environment and nature, contribute to the small- and medium-sized enterprises development, can improve the place image.

The experience of Turkey, South Africa and Russia was analyzed, which showed many similarities among travelers choosing this type of tourism: cultural and historical interest, education, enthusiasm, middle and high income, having hobbies, convicted in environmental and social justice, with the desire for authenticity".

The following results are of particular interest: the importance of travel partners and the possibility of direct contact with local agents, which allows to dive deeply into the local culture, share views and way of thinking, imbued with ideas, which ultimately leads to a long-lasting transformational effect of the trip.

Interviews with local agents, carriers of unique cultural heritage and knowledge, showed that the main motive for participating in the project for them is the intangible component and they doubt the possibility of scaling such trips to large groups of people. In their opinion, then the journey will lose its transformational effect and will not be so exciting. Thus, we come to the conclusion that although the possibilities of transformational tourism for sustainable development are wide, nevertheless, the uniqueness of trips and need of deep immersion in culture makes it difficult to widely spread such trips and the opportunity to significantly influence the tourism industry. Of course, it is necessary to consider the serious limitations of this study: a small sample of respondents, the qualitative nature and focus on the case of only one company in the Russian market.

It should not be forgotten that other studies have emphasized the need for local government agencies to support such transformative tourism projects, stressing that they will help to preserve an original culture, facilitate nature-based tours, promote environmentally friendly destinations, foster the development of small- and medium-sized enterprises, increase residents' interest in their own culture and bring additional income to the budget.

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