

An analytical autoethnographic study of culture's role in transformative tourism experiences

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ABSTRACT

Transformations are a social process that has both psychological and social outcomes. However, current studies tend to neglect the social outcomes of transformations, i.e., social transformations, as transformative tourism experience (TE) studies emphasise the psychological transformations from travelling. This study examines tourists' social transformations from travelling to a different cultural environment. It draws upon a co-created TE perspective to expand on culture's role in TE using an analytical autoethnographic method triangulated with twenty bloggers travelling to Vietnam. The study also contributes to a better understanding of TE barriers during cultural consumption and identifying positive and negative (adverse) perspectives, behaviours and values resulting from tourists' cross-cultural experiences. Overall, it contributes to understanding culture's dynamic role in co-created TE. Finally, the study offers practical implications, namely improving cultural explanations in cultural materials to educate tourists, promoting good host-tourist relations, improving competencies in guides, and reviewing and creating a best practice for facilitating TE.

1. Introduction

Tourism experiences hold strong potential for improving and shaping tourists' everyday lives. For many, tourism provides cultural, relational and personal experiences (Coelho, Gosling, & Almeida, 2018), educational (Morgan, 2010) and health and wellbeing benefits (Vada, Prentice, Scott, & Hsiao, 2020). Some tourists feel transformed (Laing & Frost, 2017), and scholars predict transformation as an upcoming economic phenomenon (Pine & Gilmore, 2013), whereby tourists attach significant meaning to their experiences. Transformative tourism experiences (TEs) foster tourist perspectives, values, and behaviour change through exposure to different social, cultural, and geographical spaces (Lean, Staiff, & Waterton, 2014; Mezirow, 1978; Pung, Khoo, Del Chiappa, & Lee, 2022).

TE outcomes hold great personal and societal potential that transcends the tourism experience. Psychological empowerment, like confidence and self-belief, is a prominent outcome when tourists (re) evaluate their life priorities and shift their self-perspectives (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, 2018). However, TE outcomes are not purely psychological. Transformation is a social process that often involves viewpoints expressed by others that may be incongruent with what the

tourist knows (Mezirow, 1991). Transformations can thus be defined as tourists becoming more self-aware (psychological) and fostering a deep sense of identification and connection to others in the world (social) (Reisinger, 2013; Soulard, McGehee, Stern, & Lamoureux, 2021). For example, tourists transform through learning different lifestyle knowledge (Dillette, Douglas, & Andrzejewski, 2019), physical health or skill competencies (Walter, 2016), or perspectives regarding socio-culturally different others (Lukoff, 2018). Tourists may also undergo behavioural changes that influence their social surroundings when they transform themselves or their world views (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). For example, transformed couch surfers actively encourage Couchsurfing experiences or become hosts to reciprocate the trust, kindness, and friendships experienced (Decrop, Del Chiappa, Mallargé, & Zidda, 2018). Thus, TE outcomes have the power to shape society. These findings align with Soulard et al.'s (2021) study that suggests transformations affect tourists' social identity, such as the bonds or sense of belonging with destination residents. Nevertheless, few studies focus on transformation's non-psychological (e.g. social) outcomes, although the original conception of transformation theory suggests perspective transformation occurs beyond the isolated individual (Mezirow, 1991). Exploring TE through cross-cultural contexts provides a better understanding of social

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outcomes, given that tourists are exposed to different perspectives and lifestyles that can trigger transformations.

Current studies identify a central role of culture for critical reflection and heightened emotions, thereby a critical TE trigger. Previous literature suggests culture can be a means for tourists to critically compare differences and learn new lifestyles, skills and interests (Laing & Frost, 2017). Furthermore, cultural differences may cause tourists to experience heightened emotions, such as culture shock - a disorienting state of mind due to fear or anxiety (Furnham, 1984, 2019). This disorienting dilemma causes tourists to critically reflect on their experiences (Lozanski, 2013; Nawijn & Biran, 2019; Soulard et al., 2021). However, while the studies emphasise the importance of culture as a critical trigger, they do not provide a comprehensive and nuanced picture of what and how cultural materials can act as a physical stimulus to trigger TE. This study expands on the role of culture by identifying these important cultural materials and how the process of cultural consumption influences tourists' transformations.

Second, TE conceptualisations emphasise positive transformations, overlooking the detrimental effects of negative transformations (Pope, 2018). Focusing solely on positive transformations limits insight into preventive measures or strategies for negative transformations. Observing negative transformations and their causes can address problem areas to nurture the ever-growing importance of cross-cultural tolerance and understanding (UNWTO, 2023). Importantly, anecdotal evidence suggests that tourists experiencing doubt and uncertainty may interpret their experiences negatively, resulting in adverse outcomes (Prince, 2017). This study identifies how negative transformations occur through the same transformative process as positive transformations during tourists' cultural consumption.

Finally, the consumption of cultural materials is a learning experience influenced by past experiences (Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, & Benckendorff, 2012). Thus, while tourists may encounter a different way of life in a cross-cultural experience (Richards, 2018), they may not necessarily develop greater open-mindedness and a transformed worldview. Past research examining barriers to TE has primarily used study-abroad contexts. Study tour participants failed to transform because there were limited opportunities to critically reflect and challenge their worldviews (Patterson, 2015) or because the study abroad experience was too brief to reflect on their experiences (Foronda & Belknap, 2012). Other TE barriers may be present for different types of visitors, so we seek insight into TE barriers for independent tourists.

The purpose of this study is to expand on culture's role in co-created TE. Specifically, this study investigates how a destination's culture serves as an important stimulus for tourists' subjective meaning-making in TE. The study is conducted using an autoethnographic inquiry supplemented with a blog analysis of Vietnam. We chose Vietnam due to its popularity with international visitors (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 2020), its challenging history and pop culture influences (Alneng, 2002), and its transformative potential (Upton, Schänzel, & Lück, 2018). The findings depict three roles of culture: 1) serving as cultural materials, 2) as a passive object to be 'gazed' upon by tourists as is and facilitated by guides through a presentation of the destination's cultural interpretation (experience co-creation), and 3) tourists' interpretation of culture for transformations (interpreted culture). These three roles of culture then form the experience co-creation that serves towards triggering tourists' transformations. However, tourists may experience different barriers (inward and outward) during this experience co-creation process. Tourists' positive and negative transformations can occur through the same co-created experience process - depicting the co-created TE. The study overall serves to better understand the role of culture in co-created TE and extends the current literature on the role of culture, the barriers towards transformations and the potential for adverse transformations in TE.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The co-created transformative experience

One of TE's earliest theoretical conceptualisations derives from education: meaningful behavioural changes occur when individuals are (1) exposed to a new challenge, role, or assumption and (2) begin to understand themselves and their relationship with others (Mezirow, 1978, 1991). Aptly named "transformative learning theory" (TLT), this theory describes an adult learner's ten-step process to behavioural transformations (Mezirow, 1991). TLT's ten steps are synthesised into four core components for volunteer tourists: (1) disorienting dilemmas, challenging experiences, and the role of emotions, (2) dialogue and reflection, (3) self-actualisation achievement, and (4) re-integration into society (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). Tourism scholars, particularly those focused on voluntourism and ecotourism, have widely employed TLT (Stone & Duffy, 2015).

TLT highlights two critical factors in tourist transformations. The first is the role of disorienting dilemmas, which create a state of mind where tourists realise a need for change before learning and applying new knowledge and skills (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). Coghlan and Gooch (2011) further emphasise that successfully integrating new knowledge and skills into everyday life requires supportive surroundings and active facilitation. As TLT in tourism contexts often uses active facilitation to train, teach, or engage participants, the outcomes often relate to new skills or knowledge contributing to participants' overall transformation (Sen & Walter, 2020).

Some TE scholars approach the TE concept through the lens of existentialist philosophy (Canavan, 2018). Existentialism suggests that people anxiously search for life's purpose and achieve *existential authenticity* when they become one with their true selves (Brown, 2013). Existential authenticity is an activity-focused tourist motivation rather than an object-focused conceptualisation (Wang, 1999). Tourism experiences allow tourists to self-explore and re-examine their self-understandings, ultimately achieving an *existential transformation* (Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017). Existential TE is highly self-directed and is often serendipitous (Pung, Gnoth, & Del Chiappa, 2020). As tourists' past experiences culminate in a 'peak episode' in their TE (Kirillova et al., 2017), the outcomes of existential transformations are often psychological, with tourists emphasising they found their true selves and a sense of fulfilment (Hirschorn & Hefferon, 2013).

The TLT and TE theories focus on deconstructing people's subjective transformation processes to understand the associated personal outcomes, resulting in explorations within specific tourism contexts. For example, TLT is heavily used in education or voluntourism (Stone & Duffy, 2015), while existential transformation dominates independent travel research (Canavan, 2018). Researchers recently put forth a co-created perspective through a systematic review to holistically understand TE. The co-created perspective envisions the TE concept as a multi-dimensional interconnected co-created process comprising experience, experience consumers (e.g. tourists), and experience facilitators (e.g. guides) that adapt to a variety of tourism contexts (Teoh, Wang, & Kwek, 2021). The experience dimension encompasses essential experiential characteristics holding transformative potentials, such as the natural landscape and its awe-inducing properties (Aquino, Schänzel, & Hyde, 2017). Consumers can interpret these characteristics subjectively based on their self-directed cognition and emotion, and experience facilitators can shape these features depending on the tourism experience (Teoh et al., 2021). Thus, the co-created perspective envisions how multiple dimensions (actors) contribute to TE, and how culture holds an important dynamic role within the destination in triggering TE and shaping transformations (Laing & Frost, 2017; Soulard et al., 2021).

One of the central ideas behind this co-created TE is that the destination provides the stimuli, whilst the tourist's role is to generate their own unique interpretation of their experience which is often backed by tourists' past experiences and expectations (Chirakranont &

Sakdiyakorn, 2022; Knollenberg, McGehee, Boley, & Clemmons, 2014). DeCROP et al.'s (2018) findings depict how culture can stimulate transformations during the co-created TE. In this case, when couchsurfers are exposed to different cultures, they learn, accept, tolerate and become acculturated – that is, internalising and re-enacting these new foreign perspectives, values or behaviours (Decrop et al., 2018). This acculturation process can be viewed as an intercultural transformation, where an individual evolves from a 'mono-cultural' to an increasingly 'intercultural' person (Kim, 2001, 2015). Certainly, the co-created experience does not only occur between the destination and the tourist. Other agents, such as tour guides, also hold an equally crucial role in facilitating co-created TE.

Previous literature suggests and identifies how tourism operators and their respective employees (guides) can purposefully design and facilitate critical reflection during TE (Soulard, McGehee, & Stern, 2019; Walker & Weiler, 2017). Often, these tour operators are driven by their transformations, and facilitating TE in others is a means for them to enact their transformed behaviours (Ateljevic & Tomljenovic, 2018). Critical reflection is facilitated through introducing and teaching topics of cultural differences and other social issues, bridging cultural differences, storytelling and playing games (Becker, 2018; Soulard et al., 2019; Walker & Weiler, 2017). These strategies ultimately aim to achieve the right atmosphere where tourists can become comfortable and co-exist with cultural differences (Coetzee, Liu, & Filep, 2019). However, barriers can also occur should guides fail to provide sufficient emotional support, time for critical reflection and if tourists do not wish to adopt these differences (Soulard et al., 2019). Other barriers may be present, attributed to the lack of exposure to residents' lifestyles, shorter stays and tourists' failure to actively explore cultural differences (Pung & Del Chiappa, 2020). In this case, tourists may instead reinforce their prejudices (Illeris, 2014; Patterson, 2015).

2.2. Culture and its roles in transformation

Culture is often difficult to define due to its broad abstractions encompassing varying notions of human behaviour (Tuleja, 2017). One notable definition considers culture as "a product of society and is historical; it includes ideas, patterns and values; it is selective and learned, and is an abstraction from behaviour and the products of behaviour" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 157). This definition excludes human behaviours, as behaviour is a psychological product that does not contribute to anthropology. However, modern cultural scholars have suggested that behaviour is part of culture since it influences social groups' behaviour and interprets other social groups' behaviour (i.e. cross-cultural communication) (Spencer-Oatey, 2012).

Scholars have approached culture through different epistemologies. There are etical or emical definition differences of culture (Li, 2014). Etically, some studies focus on comparing one cultural group to another. These can be using values to not only unify a particular group's culture but also cross-compare cultures (e.g. high power distance vs. low power distance) (Hofstede, 2011), while others focus on cross-cultural communication (Ferri, 2018). Instead, the emic stance approaches a holistic view that tries to have a complete understanding of culture by viewing culture as a 'blueprint' that encapsulates all social actions and behaviour (Li, 2014). Culture becomes a flexible concept defined in multiple ways since epistemological differences expose various facets of culture (Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht, Lindsley, & Eds., 2006). Thus, providing a unified definition of culture is impractical; instead, for practical purposes, scholars must explain how they define culture (Jahoda, 2012). We define culture as a learned "tool kit of practices" that includes a particular society's values (i.e. the abstract ideals) and way of life (e.g. revered symbols, beliefs and expectations held for one another, and material objects created) (Giddens, Duneier, Appelbaum, & Carr, 2017). Our definition forms an emic approach, which attempts to provide a thick description to understand the role of culture in tourist transformations (Li, 2014).

To better understand how tourist transformations might occur within the destination, it is necessary to understand the dynamic role culture holds in TE, particularly within the different actors in the experience (Richards, 2018). The first part of triggering TE is that TE requires a stimulus (Pung et al., 2020; Pung et al., 2022). As highlighted, culture includes a particular society's values and way of life and is often a significant tourist attraction. Thus, culture's first role is that of a physical stimulus (cultural materials) especially since some tourists are highly motivated to seek, discover, experience and consume the materially, intellectually, and emotionally-laden tangible and intangible attractions/products of a particular society (UNWTO, 2023). The destination culture enables tourists to develop memorable experiences and destination loyalty (Chen & Rahman, 2018). Since World War II, considerable growth in culture's ability to attract international tourists to various destinations worldwide has led to a form of tourism labelled "cultural tourism" (Richards, 2018).

Richards (2018) further suggests that cultural tourism should be studied 'as a collection of cultural practices engaged by various actors in the destination and by tourists themselves' (p. 17). Thus, it is necessary to understand the role of culture in tourists. For example, Laing and Frost (2017) study identified how Italy provides a mental and physical space for respite, romance, authenticity, freedom, and adventure. As tourists observe and critically compare their home culture to Italy, they learn different lifestyles and skills and gain new interests that they otherwise would not have known (Laing & Frost, 2017). Therefore, suggesting another role of culture, which is its role in critical reflection for knowledge changes. As tourists encounter new ways of life and values, they may gain new interests and develop competencies that can transform how they view their own life and others (Richards, 2018; Robledo & Batle, 2017). This has been further verified in recent studies, suggesting that tourist transformations include reflection, cross-cultural understanding and behavioural changes (Pung et al., 2022).

Another role of culture is that it evokes heightened emotions. Transformation is a social process involving multiple incongruent viewpoints (Mezirow, 1991). Tourism often involves cross-cultural interactions between varying unfamiliar and sometimes highly contrasting perspectives, lifestyles, and values between the tourist and the destination's culture (Robledo & Batle, 2017). Cultural differences can create heightened pleasant (awe) or unpleasant emotions (anxiety) (Laing & Frost, 2017; Liu, Volčić, & Gallois, 2019; Lozanski, 2013). Culture shock, for example, is an unpleasant state of emotions (fear and anxiety) towards cultural differences and occurs when tourists interpret their situation as threatening or dangerous (Furnham, 1984, 2019). However, whilst culture shock is unpleasant, these heightened emotions are necessary for TE as it creates dilemmas that cause them to reflect on their assumptions and values critically (Nawijn & Biran, 2019; Soulard et al., 2021).

Values are one's beliefs and motivational goals towards actions (Schwartz, 2012). Values comprise four central motivational goals: (1) openness to change, (2) self-transcendence, (3) self-enhancement, and (4) conservation. These four goals house ten fundamental values forming a circular continuum of related values that can be either congruent or conflicting (Schwartz, 2012). For example, values situated in self-transcendence oppose self-enhancement values; openness to change values oppose conservation. As tourists consume cultural materials in the destination and are stimulated cognitively and emotively, they may gain new knowledge that influences a change in perspectives, values and behaviours. However, very few have studied the dynamic role of culture and how it influences transformations in perspectives, values and behaviours. There is still a significant gap between tourists' consumption of culture and their transformations.

The gaze concept applies to cultural consumption behaviour within a destination, as it allows tourists to sense pleasure in their experiences and organises tourists' encounters with the cultural 'other' (Urry, 1990). The initial gaze conception suggested that destinations provide visual novelty, distinguishable from tourists' everyday life (Urry, 1990).

However, strict emphasis on visual stimuli undermines the sonic, tactile, and olfactory sensations crucial to the embodied experience — tourists must manage familiar and unfamiliar senses when traversing sensorily rich environments (e.g. undulating pavements, dust, noise, smell) (Edensor, 2018). A redefinition expands the gaze concept to represent tourists' practice of interpreting, evaluating, comparing and making connections to various experiential stimuli (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Thus, the gaze concept can serve as a lens to discuss how tourists consume culture and how that may shape their transformations.

The gaze functions to perceive culture within a tourism experience and potentially informs how tourists' socio-cultural perspectives can be co-created and transformed. For example, museum tourists employ multiple layers of gaze (i.e. perceptual filters), influencing how they perceive themselves and the “other”, objects, spaces, and institutions at home or away (Stylianou-Lambert, 2011). *Othering* is central to the visual experience of the gaze as it allows tourists to understand their experiences by creating a sense of dichotomy between themselves and the unfamiliar cultures (Bresner, 2010). However, the concept of othering has drawbacks as it derives from a ‘political vision’ reflecting two separate worlds, e.g. ‘us’ (Western, Europe, and civilised) versus ‘them’ (Oriental, East, and primitive) (Bresner, 2010; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Said, 1979). Therefore, depending on how tourists interpret this dichotomy, they may experience TE barriers. The gaze also describes different social actors' behaviours within the experience. A triadic gaze relationship occurs between the tourist, other tourists, and hosts and requires mutual understanding for a harmonious relationship (Lin & Fu, 2020). Superficial gaze perceptions and behaviours change through dynamic encounters with the cultural other (Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Lin, 2017), suggesting a co-created gaze reduces cultural conflicts.

Tourists may seek unique experiences from their everyday lives (MacCannell, 1999). Unfortunately, this motive results in tourists' fixation on the ordinary lives of cultural others, a milieu not immediately evident to outsiders (Urry & Larsen, 2011). MacCannell (1973) posits that locals may choose to “stage” a facet of their lives to prevent the intrusive gaze. However, staging can disenchant tourists since it does not represent a genuine lifestyle (MacCannell, 1999). The gaze objectifies locals' lifestyles and suggests that the touristic staging of local lifestyles hinders the gaze practice (Wang, 1999). Likewise, barriers in the gaze practice may impact tourists' TE, an effect not yet explored. Barriers, particularly in the gaze practice, should be explored further as they may explain why shorter stays appear as TE barriers (Pung & Del Chiappa, 2020).

Tourists transform by experiencing various social, cultural, economic, and even geographical spaces (Lean et al., 2014). Thus, understanding what makes a cross-cultural experience transformative allows for better tourism experience designs since transformations require experiences to be meaningful (Coelho et al., 2018). A co-created TE perspective becomes imperative because one “cannot be a cultural tourist without cultural materials to consume”; tourists need some level of “cultural capital or competence” for tourism to be meaningful (Richards, 2018, p.17). Drawing from this perspective, the current study expands understanding into the role of culture, specifically, how culture is consumed and informs tourists' co-created transformations. The theoretical gaps identified on the role of culture, the potential for adverse transformations and barriers are addressed through the following research question: *What is the role of culture in co-created transformative experiences?*

3. Methods

We adopted an analytical autoethnography approach, grounded by an interpretive paradigm to understand tourists' co-created TE in a cross-cultural environment. An interpretive approach accepts that reality is socially constructed and acknowledges that tourists have different experiences in their social worlds, thus grounded by a dualistic ontology where multiple realities exist (Slevitch, 2011). In TE, realities are based

solely on the tourist's experiences (i.e. relativity). Tourists construct their reality using existing reference points and past realities rather than a single objective reality (Stern, 2019). Thus, we acknowledge a subjectivist epistemological lens in exploring TE since experiences continuously develop between the “foreground” and “background” (Stern, 2019). This study is value-laden (i.e. axiology), and biases are present in data collection and interpretation as the researchers take on an emic role in the interpretive paradigm and research process (Cassell, Cunliffe, & Grandy, 2018).

This study draws on the autoethnographic field experiences of the first author (henceforth R1) with blog triangulations from twenty global travel bloggers. Autoethnography is a powerful method for capturing the TE process (Pung, Yung, Khoo-Lattimore, & Del Chiappa, 2019). It requires critically reflecting on complex insider experiences and relaying the emotional relations present in the tourist space (Kwek, Wang, & Weaver, 2019). Two contrasting schools of thought support autoethnographic methods: evocative and analytical.

The evocative approach uses storytelling narratives to expose the author's thought processes and relationship with the data, which comprise lived experiences (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016). It reveals complex subjects but leaves data “unfinalised” and open to interpretations (Shepherd, Laven, & Shamma, 2020). Thus, while the evocative approach offers unique perspectives, theorisation cannot occur because the data are self-reliant (Wall, 2016). Self-reliance, or failing to acknowledge other field actors, can quickly devolve into self-absorption and lose credibility during theorisation (Wall, 2016). In contrast, the analytical approach uses autoethnography's reflexivity to gain broader insights into social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). The evocative approach appears formless and ambiguous in contributions, whereas the analytical approach uses theoretical underpinnings to clarify field actors' actions, perceptions, and dialogues (O'Hara, 2018). The analytical approach calls on the researcher to emphasise interrelationships between oneself and others (Anderson, 2006). Since we aim to draw a theoretical conclusion, we use the analytical approach.

This study draws on triangulation to ensure trustworthiness (credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability) (Decrop, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These four trustworthiness criteria will be discussed in detail throughout this section. Triangulation includes different perspectives to ensure the plausibility of the expressed reality is ‘truthful’ (credible); this study fulfils it through data, method and investigator triangulations (Decrop, 1999; Flick, 2018). First, the study uses primary data (e.g. R1's autoethnographic field notes, collected brochures, photographs and videos) and secondary data (e.g. blogs) for data triangulation (Decrop, 1999). Second, method triangulation combines R1's autoethnographic reflexivity and content analysis on bloggers' posts describing stories and events to draw an interrelationship between R1 and bloggers (Anderson, 2006; Decrop, 1999). Finally, investigator triangulation involves multiple researchers as it considers the subjectivity of researchers and how researchers' gender, race and culture can create biases — a potential confirmability limitation (Decrop, 1999).

Confirmability refers to the neutrality of the findings (Decrop, 1999). This study is value-laden in its method, i.e. autoethnography. As such, rather than striving to be value-free and objective, we provide each researcher's background to establish how the researcher's values and roles may affect the study (i.e. reflexivity) (Cassell et al., 2018). R1 is a third-generation Chinese, born and raised in Malaysia, a multicultural and secular state with Islam as its predominant religion. R1 has an open and liberal worldview, as he had the opportunity to interact with different cultures growing up (e.g. Malays and Indians) and has lived abroad in Canada and Australia. He tends to take a mediated stance on others' differing perspectives, i.e. cultural differences, given his liberal worldview. Therefore, it is likely that R1 experiences transformations since he is more accepting of contrasting perspectives.

Furthermore, as R1 conceptualised the study and conducted data collection, analysis and interpretations throughout the research, his mediated stance would potentially be present in this research. Bias

presence is a known limitation in qualitative methodologies (Cassell et al., 2018). Furthermore, to ensure that the findings are not 'self-indulgent' (see Mura & Khoo-Lattimore, 2018), further triangulations are necessary to improve the confirmability, and we present R2 and R3's background and roles in this study. R2 is a Singaporean Chinese and has lived in Australia since 1998. R2's research expertise is drawn from her industry and academic careers, focusing on tourist experiences. R3 grew up in mainland China but has resided in Western societies since 1999. These experiences shape R3's research into cross-cultural tourist experiences. R2 and R3 oversaw the research process to ensure methodological rigour and guided the development of the final interpretations of the research — thus, serving as investigator triangulation.

In January 2020, during a six-day field study in Vietnam, R1 collected field notes of observations and experiences, promotional materials of visited attractions where available, photographs and video logs where allowed, conducted casual interviews with local tour operators, and casual discourse with other tourists. We chose Vietnam for observation owing to its popularity as a tourism destination, literature citing Vietnam's TE potential (Upton et al., 2018), and R1's degree of familiarity with Vietnam's culture. Dependability refers to the consistency and reproducibility of the findings (Decrop, 1999). A potentially unique limitation of this study's dependability is the time the field study in Vietnam is conducted (January 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic surging). Given the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the tourism landscape (Sigala, 2020), the findings may not be reproducible. However, this study has attempted to ensure dependability by thoroughly describing the methodology.

Vietnam tourism has surged in popularity since the economic *doi moi* (renovation) programme in 1986 (Suntikul, 2010). Between December 2018 and December 2019, Vietnam saw a 24.4% increase in international visitors (totalling approximately 1.7 million international visitors) (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 2020). Global travel bloggers often journey through Southeast Asia to explore exotic experiences (Bruner, 1991). Vietnam feeds the imagination owing to its rich, complex, and challenging history, diverse landscapes, and pop culture influences (Alneng, 2002). Scholars studying Western battlefield tourists in Vietnam acknowledge that these individuals often unexpectedly experience deeply significant moments when reflecting on various aspects of humanity (e.g. life and death) (Upton et al., 2018). This response points to Vietnam's transformative potential for perspective transformations.

Selecting Vietnam enabled R1 to situate between a complete outsider's perspective and an insider, providing a unique insight into culture's role in TE. Vietnam and Malaysia are South-East Asian countries with similar economic activities (e.g. a rice economy) and may share similar societal norms or values (Talhelm & English, 2020). In addition, given R1's Chinese heritage, R1 is familiar with Confucian values highly evident in Vietnamese culture (Vu & Pham, 2021). Thus, as a tourist moderately familiar with Vietnamese culture, R1 might experience transformative outcomes different from those who lack familiarity entirely, such as the bloggers in this study.

The blogs chosen for analysis are essential to further ensure the study's credibility through data triangulation (Decrop, 1999; Hamilton, 2019). The blogs provide differing accounts of the phenomena, therefore mitigating the biases present in this research as discussed earlier (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). Blogs can express tourists' 'impressions, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings' (Banyai & Glover, 2012, p. 268) and provide naturally occurring personal accounts filled with the expression of thoughts and feelings that researcher-led interviews may hinder (Bosangit, Hibbert, & McCabe, 2015). Previous research elucidates blogs' effectiveness in examining tourist transformations (Bosangit et al., 2015). We employed purposive sampling in blog selection (Cassell et al., 2018), as it allows for selecting the most comprehensive and detailed accounts of bloggers' experiences in Vietnam. We do not provide direct identification to protect bloggers' anonymity and traceability (Coffelt, 2017). Transferability refers to whether the findings are applicable in

other similar groups or setting (Decrop, 1999). We acknowledge that whilst the study has attempted to ensure trustworthiness through data, method and investigator triangulations, due to differences in cultural backgrounds between the bloggers and R1, we caution against the transferability of this in future research. However, detailed search criteria are provided along with bloggers' anonymised profiles to mitigate issues with transferability. Moreover, thick descriptions of the findings are presented such that the findings can be used to compare with different contexts, particularly with contexts of a similar cultural background (i.e. Southeast Asia).

We identified relevant blogs using the following keywords in the Google search engine: "Vietnam travel experiences", "Vietnam travel blogs", and

"Vietnam transformative travel blogs". However, most of the identified blogs were shorter travel guides, often provided a list of attractions, and did not delve into details of the bloggers' thoughts or feelings. We scanned for reflexive and possessive pronouns (e.g. me, myself, my) to ensure blog posts exhibited TE processes or details of bloggers' experiences. This addition ensured that bloggers justified their recommendations with their personal experiences. The search engine returned irrelevant matches after ten pages. We cross-examined the results and removed duplicates by using the same search terms in another search engine, DuckDuckGo. Our study's limitation is its use of English-language blogs, whose authors mainly originate from Western societies. In all, we analysed twenty blogs. The bloggers' profiles are presented in Appendix A.

We also analyse all blogs' comment sections. Blogging is a constructive process in which the blogger's and the reader's worlds intersect through the texts presented (Bosangit et al., 2015). The blogging act represents the blogger's reality, which the reader then interprets, formulating another representation of the experience. Thus, the dialogues between bloggers and readers in the comments section provide further insight into either person's experiences. However, we rigorously excluded comments not relating to Vietnam or failing to provide enough supporting context. For example, we exclude comments without explanations like "I loved/hated Vietnam so much" since it does not provide insight into the subject.

We employed thematic analysis to find patterns relating to R1's and bloggers' lived experiences. We began by gaining familiarity with the data and understanding the accounts' meaning, followed by open, axial, and selective coding (Fig. 1) (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). We then employed constant comparison to decide on suitable labels. For example, "demanded more money", "exchanged expletives", and "approached by locals" were labelled as "socio-cultural interactions". A description supplemented the label: "describes the local and tourist encounters". These interactions can be positive (e.g. friendliness or showing kindness) or hostile (e.g. scammed, ripped off or harassed), representing the behaviours of locals in the tourist's eyes. The interrelations from the thematic analysis are depicted in Figs. 2, 3 and 4. Fig. 2 depicts how cultural materials feed tourists' cultural consumption in the experience co-creation process. Fig. 3 depicts how tourists' transformations in perspectives, behaviour and values occur from the experience co-creation. Fig. 4 summarises and encapsulates the entire co-created TE process and the roles of culture.

4. Results

4.1. The role(s) of culture in experience co-creation

This study identifies and explores culture's role as an entity for tourists' consumption and transformation. We uncovered three roles of culture through tourists' cultural consumption process. Cultural materials represent culture's first role and depict the mutually inclusive stimuli and reference points for tourists' experience co-creation and meaning-making. These are the cultural landscape, natural landscape, and socio-cultural interactions. The *cultural landscape* includes

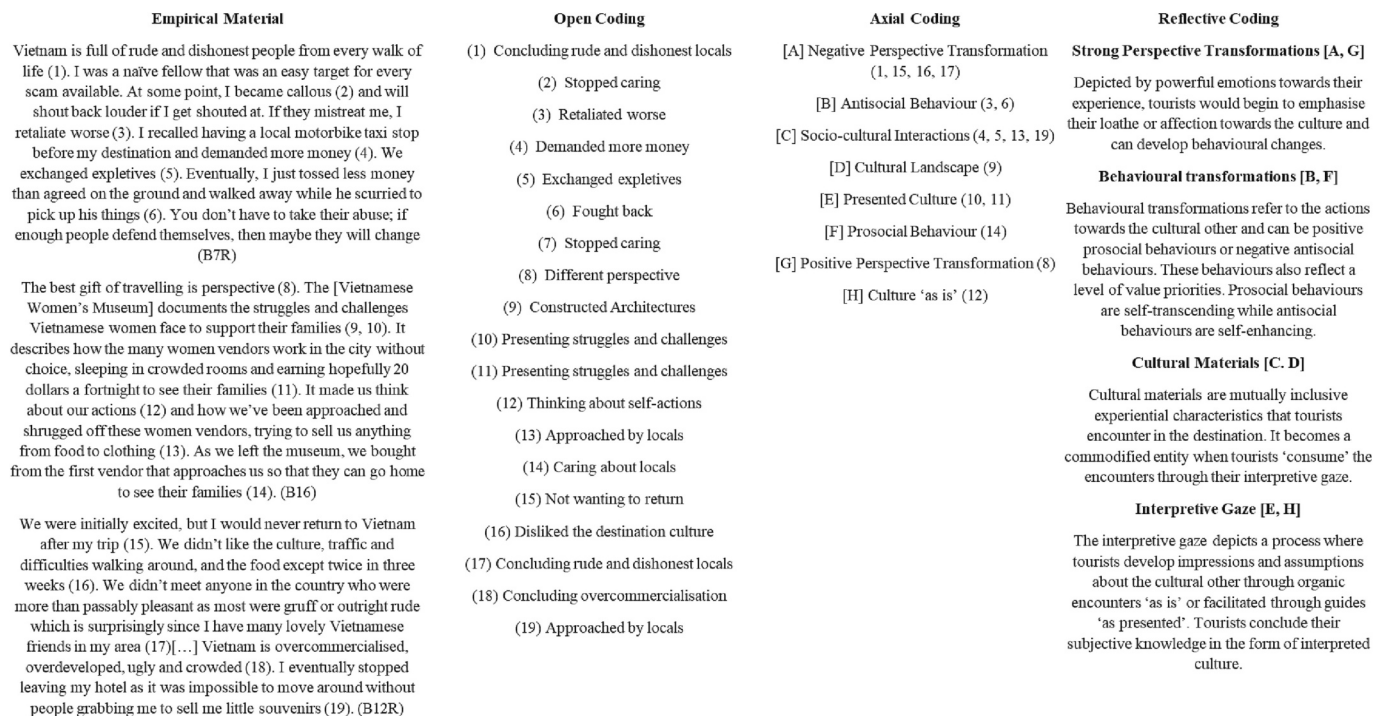


Fig. 1. The coding process.

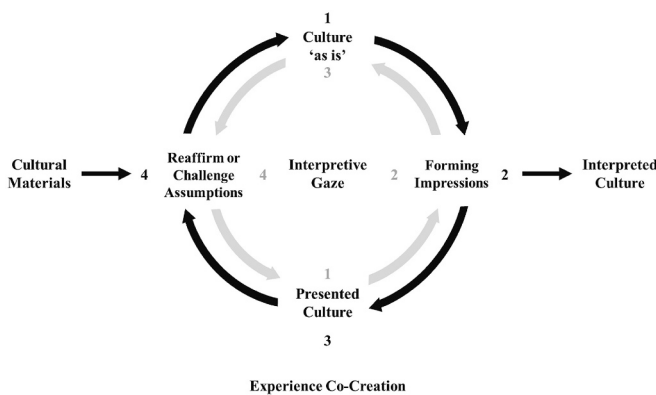


Fig. 2. The interpretive gaze in experience co-creation.

The Vietnam War Remnants Museum is a brutal reminder of the war. It's packed with tourists, but the halls were dead silent as visitors walked past the essays and haunting photos, each taking an emotional journey of their own [...] I left the museum nauseous, crying for the victims, and outraged at the foolishness of war.

The second role of culture reflects tourists' cultural consumption of cultural materials, which informs how a destination's culture becomes commodified through tourists' gaze. We define this unique co-creation interaction between the destination and tourist as the interpretive gaze. The interpretive gaze can occur naturally through the culture 'as is' or facilitated by guides' 'presented culture' (see Fig. 2). Guides in this study are people (i.e., local guides) and objects (i.e. interpretive sign-ages). Whether naturally or facilitated, tourists form impressions — initial reactions based on bodily, emotive, and cognitive responses to cultural materials (Lv, Li, & McCabe, 2020). These impressions grow into tested assumptions as tourists compare, evaluate, or mentally connect with the culture, leading to tourists' interpretation of culture (interpreted culture). Interpreted culture represents tourists' knowledge transformation of the destination's culture. We illustrate the interpretive gaze using some examples of identified cultural materials below.

Depicting the full interpretive gaze in action through consuming cultural materials.

This section depicts the full interpretive gaze process from the cultural materials to the interpreted culture. There will be three interpretive gaze examples for each cultural material: *the cultural landscape, natural landscape and socio-cultural interactions*. The following example is illustrated using the cultural landscape as a stimulus for the interpretive gaze, depicted as black arrows and in a clockwise direction beginning from culture 'as is' in Fig. 2. For example, when observing the Old Quarter's cultural landscape, R1 notes, "*local families are huddling and dining together on tiny stools and tables out front their terraced shops on pavements*". The excerpt depicts how tourists gaze organically towards the cultural material 'as is' when traversing the destination. Furthermore, the culturally diverse landscape with bustling sounds and sight prompts R1 to develop an impression of "*genuine fascination*" and begin assuming locals "*having communal spirit as I [sic] don't see this often back home*". Gazing 'as is' caused R1 to form an impression and assumption

constructed architecture, cultural objects, and the locals' way of life. Constructed architectures are buildings or sites, while cultural objects are items such as food, clothing, or pieces for performances and exhibitions that hold historical, spiritual, and cultural significance. The local way of life is locals carrying out their daily activities. *Natural landscape* refers to the destination's natural flora, fauna, and terrain. Vietnam's topography offers various sensory stimuli through its mountains, hills, rivers, and shorelines. Finally, *socio-cultural interactions* — the local-tourist encounters and represent locals' behaviours from the tourists' view. Some bloggers broadly indicated these cultural materials as highlights of their trip. Blogger 9 (B9) briefly highlights Vietnam's diverse beauty through its natural landscape, e.g. "*awe-inspiring mountains, lush green national parks, white-sand filled beaches*", cultural landscape, e.g. "*mouth-watering food*", and socio-cultural interactions, e.g. "*warm hospitality and culture*". B8 describes how they got "*thrown into the deep end of Vietnamese culture*" due to the "*delicious street food, crazy traffic and smelly streets*" and cautions their readers that "*if it's your first time in Asia, expect to feel a bit of culture shock*". Others, like B20, delve into storytelling to describe how impactful some cultural materials are.

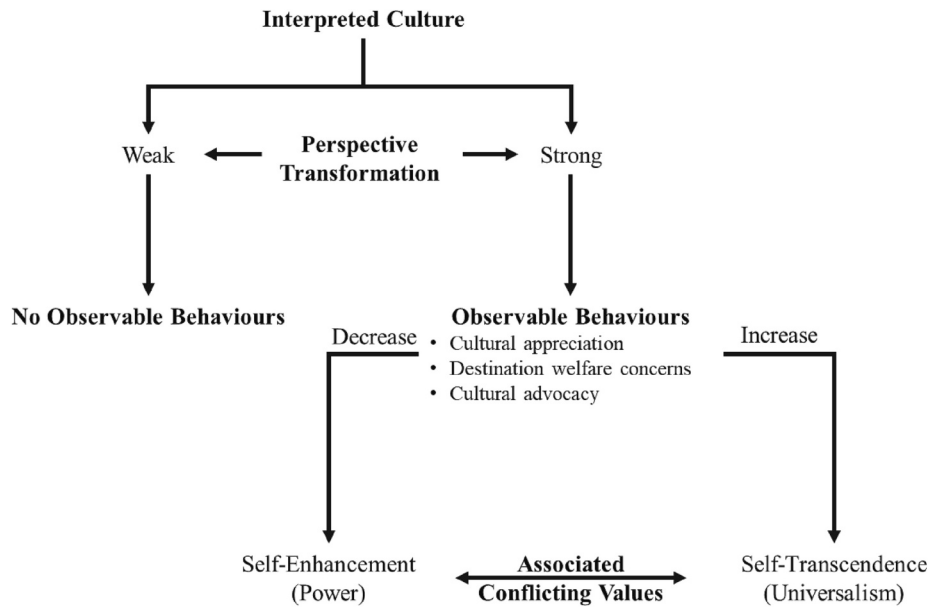


Fig. 3. Tourists' perspective, behavioural and values transformation.

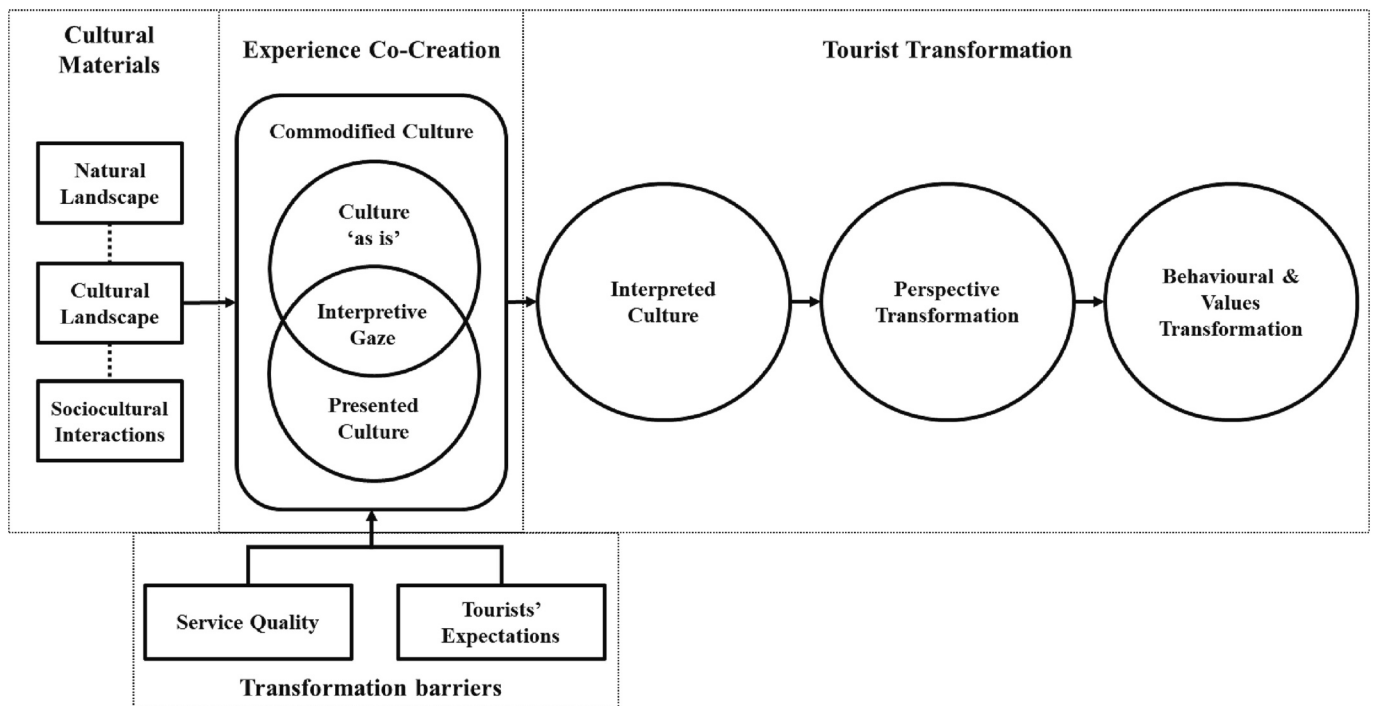


Fig. 4. Culture's role in the co-created transformative experience process.

about the culture. Being intrigued by the “communal spirit” prompted R1's discussion with his guide [A] in a famous coffee shop, Giang Coffee, the next day:

[A] clarified my assumptions by explaining that Vietnamese value social ties and neighbours eat together because everyone knows each other in the neighbourhood. [A] then elaborates how Giang Coffee exemplifies cultural ties. Their single-item menu and recipe [egg coffee] is a family tradition passed from generation to generation, and locals appreciate its deep cultural ties, hence its popularity.

By offering the insider perspective (i.e. presented culture), [A] clarified R1's assumptions, leading him to interpret his future

observations through the local lens. Most notable was R1's tour with an ethnic Dao guide [M] three days later while trekking the muddy paths and being surrounded by trees as far as the eyes could see in Sa Pa hills:

I was astonished to hear a Facebook notification. [M] whips out the phone and apologises, to which I asked [M] about using Facebook. [M] excitedly replied that everyone in the village loves using its video call function to call family daily.

From the exchange, R1 deliberates on his interpreted culture, concluding that locals readily embrace technology because they value social ties, hence why “mobile networks are affordable and strong coverage is available everywhere — including hilly and remote regions like Lào Cai”.

We emphasise that the *interpreted culture* is tourists' knowledge transformation, as it depicts tourists' subjective understanding of the destination's culture from their interpretive gaze.

The next section depicts blogger B17's reverse interpretive gaze process (counterclockwise, lighter grey arrow in Fig. 2) using the natural landscape as an example. *Natural landscape* refers to the destination's natural flora, fauna, and terrain. Vietnam's topography offers various sensory stimuli through its mountains, hills, rivers, and shorelines. We observed that the presented culture amplifies the awe-inspiring natural landscape's significance and memorability. Blogger B17 exemplifies a facilitated interpretive gaze, as he explains how hiking through the Mườ̃ng Hoa Valley is "magical" and "makes every step worthwhile.". In sharing, B17 elaborates, "having an informative guide sharing stories and history makes a tremendous difference... [as we] learn about how the cascading, golden, and light green rice fields provide locals food".

B17 further explains that his motive for visiting Sa Pa was solely for its scenery. However, the experience improved as he learned about the locals' way of life, especially their frugality and the resources available in their region. Watching locals harvesting rice fields reaffirmed B17's assumptions that "nothing wasted as everything serves a purpose.". B17 concludes his interpreted culture by stating, "the circle of life here is their secret to survival...one where all things serve a purpose (interpreted culture) and have a raw beauty that leaves a mark in our hearts (awe)". In doing so, he exhibits a deeper connection to his experience. Our findings conclude that while the natural landscape triggers tourists' emotions in the interpretive gaze, the presented culture facilitates meaning-making and improves tourists' experience.

We provide insight into tourists' negatively interpreted culture, deriving from *socio-cultural interactions* — the local-tourist encounters and represent locals' behaviours from the tourists' view. These interactions are bonding (e.g., friendliness or showing kindness) or hostile (e.g., scammed, ripped off, or harassed). We emphasise that interpretations can occur both ways and do not mean that socio-cultural interactions develop only negative interpretations. B12 perceived Vietnam as a whole as discriminating against Westerners, feeling exhausted by the constant "elaborate scams" and hostility. B12 highlights how on one occasion, a local food stall owner "aggressively denied and yelled at us such that I stumbled backwards" when she was gesturing to take a photo of the hot soup for sale. As B12 continued to explore Vietnam, she saw what she perceived to be Vietnamese propaganda in museums. B12 explained how she felt "guilty rather than outraged at being treated poorly, especially considering my country's [U.S.] atrocities against [Vietnam]" before channelling her negative feelings and interpretations as a fault of the Vietnamese government. B12 emphasised that "the government needs to change, especially when I noticed all the one-sided propaganda about the war publicised everywhere, including museums (presented culture). So, it's unsurprising locals treat us as such (reaffirmed assumptions).".

When engaging the cultural materials, tourists evaluate, compare, or make a mental or physical connection through the interpretive gaze. As impressions develop, what tourists subsequently observe 'as is' or learn from presented culture (including interpreted signages) reaffirms or challenges their assumptions. Ultimately, the interpreted culture denotes tourists' understanding of the other. Since tourists (re)construct what they know about the culture, their knowledge reflects a knowledge transformation, albeit subjective, since it derives from their experiences.

4.2. Tourists' perspective and behavioural transformations from experience co-creation

The findings also uncover the third role of culture, that is, shaping transformations from the interpreted culture. Tourists develop perspective, behavioural and values transformations regarding the cultural other from their interpreted culture to various degrees. Perspective transformations are the way tourists view the cultural other or, in some cases, themselves, while behavioural transformations relate to the subsequent actions of the tourist. We discovered perspective

transformations ranging from weak to strong when tourists recall their interpreted culture based on their experiences. Weak perspective transformations have lesser impact and endurance with no observable behavioural changes, whereas strong perspective transformations are profound and sustained with observable behavioural changes.

Tourists with *weak perspective transformations* would describe their overall sentiment about Vietnam and emphasise an increased or decreased appreciation for the culture, highlighting its impacts but not their behavioural changes. For example, B13 described how the natural landscape created a greater appreciation for Vietnam through beautiful wild rivers, such as the Mekong and its tributaries, with its waters "rapidly surging towards the ocean's caves as if the earth is tilted.". B13 concluded by posting descriptive observations of the cultural landscape and its significance:

The water buffalos clopped through the mud while locals transported goods or set fishing traps, and old ladies sang lullabies in their sampans (cultural landscape). As we headed back to Saigon, we were saddened to leave this savage beauty behind (increased appreciation). (B13).

Contrary, tourists who encountered crime and hostility showed decreased appreciation. Some of B12's audience supported B12's negatively transformed Vietnam perspectives. One reader B12R, voiced their exhaustion and shock as she elaborated how locals tried to "scam" and "rob" her. B12R highlighted that these negative experiences reflect Vietnamese culture as she notices "shocking amounts of abuse against women" during her travels, "which set the tone of their society.". In both these instances, the notion of Othering is observable (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Said, 1979).

What appears unique in these excerpts is the differences in bloggers' 'superior' tone towards the 'inferior' Other. B13's view of the Other depicted the culture as 'savage' (could be interpreted as uncivilised), showing a sense of appreciation for the cultural difference arising from their romanticised view of Vietnamese culture. Thus, the positive emotions in this instance assisted in mediating their cultural appreciation towards Vietnam. Contrary, the negative encounter and shock reinforce B12R's sense of superiority. However, B12R further explained that when she "avoided the scams and lowered...expectations", the trip improved towards the end, and "things were not all that bad.". This point further emphasises that when B12R is no longer setting expectations due to their past negative experience, they began to welcome the cultural difference. It can also be seen as B12R finding a sense of orientation or equilibrium after a 'disorienting dilemma', to which lowering their expectations allows them to begin welcoming their experiences – but not necessarily appreciating the culture. However, this reinforces how heightened emotions are crucial in triggering TE and in this study's case, how emotions shape tourists' interpretation of culture. B12R illustrates a weak perspective transformation, as the impact of the negative experiences faded once they lowered expectations.

Tourists showing *strong perspective transformations* emphasise their affection or loathing for the culture—resulting in noticeable behavioural transformations in return intentions and justifying their perspectives to others. For example, B7 told readers that he "loathe(s)" Vietnam, and "the short answer is that nobody wants to return to a place where they are mistreated and disrespected.". B7 further justifies their strong perspective transformation by explaining how he spoke with other tourists:

Other tourists I've spoken to share the same story of being ripped off or cheated. Locals overcharged me when I paid for things..., taxis rigging their meters, or [shopkeepers] preventing me from leaving the store (almost assault) until I bought something. The people were so disproportionately rude that I wouldn't feel bad if I never returned. (B7).

B7 subsequently responded to commenters and mentioned knowing people that either "love it or completely hate it" with no middle ground. Reading about the poor experiences, R1 struggled to understand how some can express so much contempt for the culture and reflected on personal experiences when reading blogs and comments that described

locals' dishonesty:

I struggled with reading about bloggers and commenters justifying their hatred for Vietnam. I saw nothing but honest people in Vietnam (strong perspective transformation). One instance I recalled during my guided tour with [A] in the chaotic and crowded streets of the Old Quarter, two ladies yelled and chased after us on their motorcycle to return [A's] dropped money. (R1).

For R1, justifying an interpretation of honesty in the culture and the "struggle with reading" about hatred for Vietnam reflects R1's profound perspective transformation. Recalling Old Quarter's streets prompted further reflections on the profound perspective transformation. R1 recalled "being pushed, shoved and not given personal space by Vietnamese people before boarding the plane to Vietnam" and becoming irritated and developing a terrible impression of Vietnamese people. However, R1 noticed himself unperturbed by similar instances of boarding the plane home. Contrasting the two cases at that moment prompted introspection where R1 realised "it was cultural [difference]" and that he should not be judgmental in the future. This profound perspective transformation appears sustained long-term since R1 travelled to Vietnam two and a half years ago:

Looking back, I still feel embarrassed by my initial impressions before I went to Vietnam. How could I be so judgmental of others? I need to be more mindful of my thoughts, reactions and actions no matter where I travel or whomever I encounter in the future.

4.3. Tourists' behavioural and values transformation resulting from different ranges of perspectives

The findings further suggest that tourists undergo behavioural changes as they develop strong perspective transformations (Fig. 3). Since behavioural changes represent abstract beliefs, they implicitly reflect tourists' values (Schwartz, 2012). Hence, tourists' post-trip behaviours and justifications of their perspectives reflect their values and underlying motives (Levontin & Bardi, 2019).

Our findings depict how tourists with strong positive perspective transformations exhibited prosocial behaviours and became cultural advocates. Cultural advocacy is self-transcending and emphasises universalism (Schwartz, 2012). In contrast, tourists with strong negative perspective transformations became cultural detractors, emphasising self-enhancement and power. R1 contrasts his behaviour before and after his trip, recalling how he previously "never had any interest in researching Vietnam even when coming across advertisements or photos on social media.". However, when R1 returned home, he notes his increased cultural appreciation and cultural advocacy as he noticed his behaviour of sharing "all the fantastic things I [sic] encountered in Vietnam, especially the good values I learned."

Furthermore, R1 became concerned about local Vietnamese welfare as he started "internet browsing about Vietnam not for travelling, but concern about locals' wellbeing and the Covid-19 situation.". For R1, positive perspective transformations translated to new behaviours. Cultural advocacy, appreciation for the culture, and especially welfare concerns for people in Vietnam represent a transformation in values related to universalism. Such behaviours and values were apparent in other bloggers, as B16 notes their strong perspective and behavioural transformations after visiting the Vietnamese Women's Museum:

The best gift of travelling is perspective. The [museum] documents Vietnamese women's struggles and challenges to support their families. It describes how the many women vendors work in the city without choice, sleeping in crowded rooms and earning hopefully 20 dollars a fortnight to see their families. It made us think about our actions and how we've been approached and shrugged off these women vendors, trying to sell us anything from food to clothing. As we left the museum, we bought from

the first vendors that approached us so that they could go home to see their families (welfare concerns). (B16).

B16R1 depict a higher level of reflection upon reading B16's post on Vietnamese women's struggles, elucidating how strong perspective transformations can become long-term behavioural transformations in everyday life (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). Specifically, B16R1 acknowledges a need for a better self and other awareness when travelling: "the [Vietnamese women's] commentary starts my day with a different perspective. How do we keep our eyes open and become more aware in our daily lives wherever we travel?"

The behaviours and values of R1 and B16 strongly contrast those with negative perspective transformations. A blog reader (B7R1) supported B7's negative perspective transformations explaining how tourists should not take locals' abuse as "if enough people defend themselves, then maybe they will change.". B7R1 commented that upon feeling wearied by locals' repeated scams, they exerted dominance over a local taxi driver by "toss[ing] his helmet and less money than agreed on the ground" and "walked away while he scurried to pick up his things.". B7R1's comments emphasised self-enhancement goals and power values, highlighted by repeated behaviours showing dominance over locals, expressing how tourists should have "an eye for an eye" mentality. B7R1 explained that they transformed from being "an easy target for every scam available" to an insensitive person who "retaliates worse if they mistreated me.". For many bloggers, reading such comments and other bloggers' cultural detraction became a point for rebuttal and advocacy depicting sustained behavioural transformations in everyday life, such as B15:

After reading many people's negative experiences, I decided to share my own [...] everyone has the right to share their own experiences, but we should never rely on them to judge a country, city, tour, event or whatever it is.

4.4. Transformation barriers: expectations and service quality

This study revealed two transformation barriers that prevent positive or negative transformations: tourists' expectations and the service quality received. Tourists' expectations are inward-focused, as these expectations developed before the experience. Service quality is outward-focused, as it reflects the onsite ability of tour organisers to shape the experience.

Tourists' expectations relate to tourists' subjective anticipation of the destination. If the destination fails to meet expectations, tourists may feel disappointed. R1 recalls conversing with a couple [V and W] during a day tour to Ninh Binh. V and W were on holiday from Canada to visit W's family for Tết Nguyên Đán (Vietnamese Lunar New Year). Upon learning that W is from Da Nang, which houses a famous tourist landmark known as the Golden Hand Bridge. R1 asked about the landmark, to which V firmly responded that the "reality is that it was not as impressive and, frankly, disappointing being there in person. As the weather was poor, the scenery was not picture-perfect compared to its advertisements."

In this case, while V's unmet expectations occurred as a transformation barrier, expectations may exacerbate transformations in other cases. For example, B14 became a cultural detractor by penning an entire blog post dissuading people from visiting Hoi An, feeling disappointed by their unmet expectations from reading online sources. B14 justified their views by highlighting Hoi An's overtourism and inauthenticities as "basket boats along the river that belongs to fishermen are now rollercoaster rides for tourists.". B14 further claimed that locals steal neighbouring countries' practices when seeing "women vendors selling paper Nuphar pretending it's Vietnamese culture" or that locals "trick" tourists for photo opportunities rather than selling their goods as it's more profitable.

B14's view reflects their expectations and how it exacerbates negative transformations, vastly differing from B18 or R1's expectations. B18

demonstrates how expectations can also prevent negative transformations, comparing how tourists find Cu Chi tunnels 'touristy' but not the Eiffel Tower in Paris:

While I agree that the Cu Chi tunnels may be touristic, so is Paris and the Eiffel Tower if you think about it (lower expectations). But many would not say they wouldn't go to the tower when they visit Paris. The Vietnam War is one of the most prominent events in the 20th century. Crawling through the tunnels is a unique experience you won't be able to find elsewhere. (B18).

Reading the different expectations and narratives prompted R1's recollection of his expectations of Vietnam, "I had a different focus as I was there to discover what makes Vietnam, Vietnam. Maybe that's why I did not face the disillusion some of these bloggers and commenters have."

Tour guides' service quality at the destination significantly shapes tourists' experiences and perspectives. Tour guides can prevent undesirable transformations and promote positive ones by actively teaching tourists about local culture and insights into local lifestyles. Conversely, poor service quality exacerbates negative transformations and forms barriers to positive ones. B3 and B7R3 illustrate differing experiences with service quality and how it affected their transformations. B3 demonstrates how good service quality enables positive transformations, describing their Sa Pa tour as "a memorable experience filled with adventure and culture. If you ever decide to come, and I highly recommend to, you have to get [H] to show you around." B3 elaborated that "I learned a lot about the villages and H's challenges as a woman here. It was an honour to have this incredible person as my guide (...) Many of my readers have since stayed with [H] and shared their beautiful experiences." By sharing their guides' contact details with their readers, B3 created a chain of positive transformations and illustrated the impacts of tourists' transformation towards their social surroundings. Conversely, B7R3 describes how tour operators aggravated their woeful experience:

Our tour guide was unhelpful too, as anytime we would ask where we would eat, his reply would be 'wherever and whatever we see'. We spent most of our time on a bus, and when we asked for an ETA to our destination, he would say soon, but we would arrive hours later. A travel agency set up this tour guide, by the way. (B7R3).

Given B7R3's hostile encounters with locals and poor service provided by their tour operator, they transformed their view of Vietnamese people into "corrupt, conniving swindlers whose aim is to get over other people just to live."

5. Conclusions, limitations, and future implications

This study sought to understand culture's role in co-created TE. The findings of this study depict three dynamic roles of culture: (1) serving as cultural materials in the destination, (2) as an entity for experience co-creation through the tourists' interpretive gaze 'as is' or facilitated, and (3) tourists' interpretation of culture for transformations. The analytical autoethnographic method allowed us to analyse and support Teoh et al.'s (2021) study depicting TE as a co-created process and emphasising culture's importance in TE. The findings show how a destination's cultural materials serve as a commodity for tourists' subjective meaning-making in TE, whether naturally gazed upon "as is" or facilitated through the presented culture.

We support the notion that cultural tourism is a "collection of practices" by many actors and that "cultural tourists" cannot exist without consuming "cultural materials" (Richards, 2018), adding that these practices foster transformations – both positive and negative. Our study provides additional insight into TE by (1) identifying barriers on a personal and tourism provider level, (2) exploring positive and negative transformations, illustrated by opposing values and behavioural outcomes, and (3) varying degrees of perspective transformations, affecting their behaviour and values transformations. Fig. 4 summarises the study's findings and depicts a co-created framework, suggesting how

culture plays a dynamic role in tourists' transformation process.

This study advances TE literature by elucidating how destination cultural materials serve as crucial reference points for tourists' co-created TE. The left section depicts cultural materials managed by the destination, which are essential sensory stimuli (i.e. reference points) that tourists use for socio-cultural comparisons (Teoh et al., 2021) and creating mental connections towards the destination (Urry & Larsen, 2011). By commodifying culture, destinations provide tourists with cultural and educational experiences (Morgan, 2010), fostering tourists' co-created knowledge transformation in the process. We propose the 'interpretive gaze' to help understand culture's continuous role during TE. Previous conceptualisations of the gaze have not provided a structure of how tourists 'practice' the gaze and how that practice can transform tourists, but instead categorise the tourist's encounter with the cultural other, highlighting what tourists find 'ordinary' or 'extraordinary' in a destination (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Our findings provide structure to tourists' meaning-making in the co-created interpretive gaze and highlight how tourists' perspective transformations affect their behavioural transformations to varying degrees. Identifying cultural materials contribute to our theoretical understanding of TE triggers while providing practical management opportunities. For example, destination management organisations (DMOs) may identify key tourism attractions to improve explanations of historical, spiritual, and cultural significance and promote the importance of good host-tourist relations.

While destinations manage cultural materials triggering TE, tourists' interpretation and transformation appear primarily self-directed. The destination's culture influences how tourists feel (emotion) and process (cognition) the information onsite (Teoh et al., 2021). The embodied experience (Edensor, 2018; Lv et al., 2020), including tourists' expectations, impressions, and assumptions, creates subjectivity in tourists' meaning-making and knowledge transformation. Previous research identified potential TE barriers when study abroad participants did not reflect critically on their experiences in situ (Patterson, 2015) or if tourists are not exposed to residents' lifestyles, have short stays, or do not actively explore (Pung et al., 2020).

As this study shows, TE barriers can result from unmet expectations rather than a lack of critical reflection. Moreover, it provides insight into how and why these barriers occur. These findings extend from previous literature suggesting that tourists have certain expectations towards a particular tourism activity (e.g. voluntourism) (Knollenberg et al., 2014). In this study, tourists have expectations towards the destination's culture. These expectations are preconceived ideas on what Vietnam should be and are often formed from promotional materials or word of mouth. However, in both cases – whether towards the tourism activity or the destination's culture, expectations can have both a detrimental or positive effect on tourists' interpretation of their experience (Knollenberg et al., 2014). These expectations towards the destination's culture may or may not be met, affecting tourists' transformation direction (i.e., positive or negative). As tourists transform their knowledge about a particular culture, they develop different perspectives. This study's limitation is that it only provides an initial exploration of how expectations affect transformation. Future research can employ in-depth interviews or pre-/post- trip methods to better understand how expectations, prior knowledge or biases affect tourists' TE.

Our results provide empirical support that TE can have positive or negative outcomes, highlighted by two opposing goals in values theory (Schwartz, 2012): self-transcendence versus self-enhancement. Like how friendship fosters positive transformations (Decrop et al., 2018), our study reveals how hostile interactions enable negative transformations. Tourists with strong positive perspective transformations become advocates for the culture, indicating their self-transcending goals and universalism values. In contrast, tourists with negative transformations pursue self-enhancement goals and power values, exhibiting antisocial behaviours towards the local culture and becoming detractors. However, another limitation is that our findings do not

reveal whether the identified values result from TE. As such, we caution against the generalisability of this research (Mays & Pope, 1995). Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to observe tourists' transformed values and to what extent or how tourists' understanding of the destination's culture unfolds beyond a single tourism experience, including whether their transformed values are sustained in other countries in a similar region. This is particularly important given that tourists may be cultural detractors in one country but cultural advocates towards another country of a similar cultural background.

Finally, this study highlights the vital role of experience facilitators, both people and objects, in tourist transformations (Teoh et al., 2021). Our study suggests that service quality provided by a tour operator is an outward-focused barrier. The findings demonstrate that when tourism operators provide good quality service while educating tourists, they can foster positive transformations. We suggest improvements from two levels: destination management organisations (DMOs) and tourism operators. First, DMOs should focus on the implementation of transformative experiences by reviewing current tourism operators' activities and developing a set of best practices that every tourism operator adheres to. For example, establishing a need for impression management tactics in service delivery and collaborative partnerships between the local community and tourism operators. Impression management tactics include guides showing a caring attitude, smiling often, and being aware and attentive to tourists' cultural needs (Manzur & Jogaratnam, 2007). Additionally, establishing collaborative partnerships between the local community and tourism operators to improve guides' competencies in localised discourse and tourism operators' ability to weave local cultural knowledge into their storytelling (Souard et al., 2019).

From the tourism operators' level, key improvements are in the experience design and facilitation. First, tourism operators must train guides in their local cultural knowledge (Walker & Weiler, 2017). Guides need to be competent in their local knowledge to ensure they are capable of educating and transferring this knowledge to tourists, which is important for reaffirming or challenging tourists' assumptions. Second, tourism operators need to design interactive ways in delivering this

knowledge efficiently. Storytelling important cultural meanings and drawing cultural comparisons are effective ways for tourists to begin critically reflecting on cultural differences (Becker, 2018; Magee & Gilmore, 2015). Finally, guides must encourage reflection time through journaling or group discussion activities (Kroth & Cranton, 2014). This is to ensure that tourists are actively reflecting on and learning about the local culture. These suggested improvements for DMOs and tourism operators are meant to mitigate the occurrence of transformative barriers and negative transformations.

Finally, for tourists not touring with a local guide, interpretive signages are essential assets for destinations. DMOs can improve interpretive signage explanations to provide an in-depth learning experience or challenge tourists' unfair implicit expectations. This becomes especially important to assist destinations in enhancing their socio-cultural sustainability and promote better cross-cultural tolerance and understanding, especially in a post-COVID world (UNWTO, 2023). While the data collected reflects tourists' transformations before the COVID pandemic, we view this study's contributions as highly relevant post-COVID since it provides new insights into TE. As this study shows, even before COVID-19, tourists can have negative transformations in their perspectives, values and behaviours to one that discriminates against an entire culture. Given the increasing racism and discriminatory sentiments during COVID-19 (see Brouder et al., 2020), it becomes necessary to acknowledge positive and negative transformations and how scholars can use their knowledge to mitigate unwanted tourist transformations.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mark Weiyi Teoh: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Anna Kwek:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Ying Wang:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Appendix A. Bloggers' profiles

Blogger Number	Gender	Where blogger is from	Where blogger is mostly based	Blog post last updated	Most recent travel post (including Vietnam)*
B1	Female	United Kingdom (U.K.)	U.K. or Australia	November 2021	July 2022
B2	Female	U.K.	U.K.	January 2015	July 2022
B3	Female	United States (U.S.)	U.S.	August 2019	July 2022
B4	Male	Netherlands	Travelling (unknown)	January 2020	July 2022
B5	Male	Germany	Thailand	June 2020	July 2022
B6	Male	Australia	Australia	March 2013	February 2016
B7	Male	U.S.	U.S.	October 2018	July 2022
B8	Female	U.K.	U.K.	February 2018	July 2022
B9	Female	Vietnam	Vietnam	May 2020	July 2022
B10	Male	Thailand	Thailand	May 2022	July 2022
B11	Female	U.S.	U.S.	December 2012	July 2022
B12	Female	U.S.	U.S.	February 2012	July 2022
B13	Male	U.S.	U.S.	November 2011	January 2014
B14	Male	Denmark	Denmark	August 2020	June 2022
B15	Female	U.K.	Thailand	January 2017	July 2022
B16	Female	U.S.	Italy	May 2015	July 2022
B17	Male	Poland	Travelling (unknown)	March 2016	July 2022
B18	Male	U.S.	U.S.	March 2022	July 2022
B19	Female	New Zealand	New Zealand	December 2021	July 2022
B20	Female	U.S.	U.S.	November 2021	July 2022

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