

On the Road to Transformation: How Self-Drive Tourism Transforms Travelers

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Abstract: Self-drive tourism, with its emphasis on traveler autonomy, independence, and engagement, plays a critical role in facilitating personal transformation. This study examines the transformative effects of self-drive tourism on travelers. Building on the concepts of experience and transformation economies, it highlights how tourism can transcend providing emotional experiences to foster deeper lifestyle transformations. In recent years, research on this topic has been conducted under the umbrella of transformational tourism. Tourism types such as volunteer tourism and studying abroad transform tourists through diverse experiences at their destinations. However, transformational tourism in the context of travel experiences between destinations remains underexplored. This study adopts a descriptive and interpretive narrative approach, using a semi-structured interview survey for data collection and analysis. The findings identify key factors driving tourist transformation: spontaneity, novel experiences, challenges, cultural shocks, and deep interpersonal connections formed during the journey. Notably, the confined space of cars in self-drive tourism promotes reflection, communication, and problem-solving, which are essential for sparking self-transformation. Additionally, traveling to multiple destinations provides continuous opportunities for reflection and learning, creating a cycle of action that supports ongoing personal transformations. The study further reveals that independence, problem-solving skills (such as handling car trouble or navigating unfamiliar routes), and interactions with travel companions significantly contribute to self-improvement. These experiences are closely tied to tourists' pursuit of authenticity, which amplifies their transformation by the journey's end. The findings contribute to the implementation of transformational tourism by identifying the mechanisms facilitating transformation in self-drive tourism. These insights are crucial for developing targeted marketing strategies aimed at consumers seeking not only adventure but also meaningful, transformative experiences. By understanding the factors that promote personal transformation, tourism providers can create authentic and engaging offerings to meet the growing demand for transformation-driven tourism.

Keywords: Transformational tourism, Self-drive tourism, Tourist transformation, Mobile experience, Self-Transformation, communication

1. Introduction

Pine and Gilmore (1999) identified four stages of customer expectations: commodities, products, services, and experience economies. The experience economy focuses on customers' emotions, aiming to provide them with memorable experiences. However, in recent years, the value of the experience economy has become commoditized, and attention has shifted to the next stage—transformation economy. In the transformation economy, customers are viewed as “aspirants” and companies are defined as “elicitors” that facilitate the realization of transformation (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). This shift indicates that customers seek not only emotional experiences but also authenticity that trigger lifestyle transformations.

Existential authenticity, arising from the darker aspects of life, is a state of being true to one's own values (Wang, 1999). Ivanovic (2022) indicated the role of transformative experiences in facilitating self-discovery and confirming one's true self. Accordingly, transformative tourism, which relates to uncovering a more authentic self, is attracting increasing attention (Reisinger, 2013).

Transformational tourism deepens one's self-awareness and connections with others, leading to growth and irreversible transformation. Many studies have focused on the types of tourism, for example, backpacker tourism (Noy, 2004), study abroad programs (Jin and Robledo, 2024), religious tourism (Jiang et al., 2023), and volunteer tourism (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017). These forms of tourism can transform tourists and provide them with hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Huang, Wang, and Wu, 2023). Most of these studies, however, focus on the experiences acquired at a destination, with limited attention given to the transformative potential of experiences gained en route to the destination.

Therefore, this study examines self-drive tourism as a means for tourists to satisfy their sense of adventure and maximize their desired experiences from origin to destination through their vehicles (Butler and Hannam, 2012). It also identifies the factors promoting tourists' transformation in this context. To this end, this study reviews the current state of research on transformational tourism through a literature review, with the aim of conducting qualitative research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Factors Influencing Tourist Transformation

In recent years, an increasing number of studies on tourist transformation have focused on the factors and timing of such transformations. Lean (2012) investigated the transformation of the self through physical mobility and clarified the process by which travelers move beyond their constrained self-image to recognize a new self. The “before,” “during,” and “after” phases of travel are intricately intertwined, with the latter two having a particularly significant impact on transformation. Furthermore, Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai (2016) organized nine themes related to transformative tourism experiences and emphasized the importance of post-trip transformation processes.

Research on transformational factors for tourists is extensive. Kirillova et al. (2017) categorized the triggers of transformational tourism experiences into three categories: spontaneity/novelty, aesthetic experience, and self-development, with spontaneity/novelty being a particularly powerful factor. These episodes tend to occur toward the end of the trip, evoking intense emotions and a sense of connection with a grand entity.

Furthermore, Pung, Gnoth, and Chiappa (2020) proposed a tourist transformation model suggesting that marginal situations and cultural shocks induce transformation. They also stated that contextual stimuli promote the acquisition of skills and values and contribute to behavioral transformation. Pung and Chiappa (2020) identified interaction with locals and other travelers, challenges, sense of place experience, extended stays, and post-trip reflection as facilitators of tourist transformation, with “short stay,” “repetitive behavior,” and “lack of access to residents’ lifestyle” as inhibitors.

Pung et al. (2020) believed that contextual stimuli can enable tourists to clearly interpret experiences and acquire skills, values, and knowledge, thereby influencing their attitudes, habits, and behaviors. Authentic experience is required to promote tourist transformation. Travelers have been transformed through rites of passage, studying abroad, heritage, pilgrimage, adventure/challenge, service learning, healing/therapy, and spiritual journeys (Ross, 2010). However, research on tourist transformation in the types of tourism that can provide these contexts remains scarce, and the potential of other types of tourism should be explored. This study identifies the types of transformational tourism that are not mentioned in previous studies.

2.2 Types and Processes of Transformational Tourism

Recent research on transformational tourism has examined the transformation triggers and processes for tourists. For example, Noy (2004) revealed the relationship between external travel and internal self-transformation through the travel narratives of Israeli backpackers; Jin and Robledo (2024) explored how students studying in foreign countries experience transformation through travel; and Jiang et al. (2023) examined the impact of tourist-to-tourist interaction (TTI), prosociality, and interpersonal authenticity on existential transformation in religious tourism, and showed that TTIs strengthened emotional solidarity and promoted prosocial behavior.

Regarding the transformative process of volunteer tourism, Kontogeorgopoulos (2017) revealed the achievement of existential authenticity through self-reflection and self-discovery across cultural, social, and economic differences, while Magrizos and Kostopoulos (2020) examined the stages of transformation and their boundary conditions. Wolf, Ainsworth, and Crowley (2017) highlighted immersive experiences as a key driver of transformation based on five typologies, including health and nature, spiritual, and cultural travel.

Previous research on transformational tourism has focused on the experience “during” the trip (at the destination) and “after” returning home. Scant attention, however, has been paid to the experience of traveling between the two locations and the relationship between the travel experience and the “before,” “during,” and “after” stages of the trip. However, according to Hannam et al. (2014), the act of tourism travel not only accomplishes a specific goal but also fulfils the experiential needs of tourists. This study aims to identify the impact of mobility experience on connecting the “during” and “after” stages of the trip and on promoting authenticity.

2.3 Transformation of the Mobile Experience in Self-Drive Tourism

The use of privately owned or rented vehicles to engage in tourist activities while traveling from the point of origin to destination is called self-drive tourism (Prideaux et al., 2001). This form of travel is unique in that travelers are free to decide the time and route of their trip and enjoy independence (Lane and Waitt, 2007). Tourists can decide their travel time, location, and route to their destination and enjoy freedom and

independence while respecting their individuality (Prideaux and Carson, 2003). Such tourism also serves as a means of satisfying an individual traveler's sense of adventure and maximizing the desired experience (Butler and Hannam, 2012).

Broz and Habeck (2015) investigated the prevalence of car leisure in the context of changing travel habits in contemporary Siberia. Although the participants expressed dissatisfaction with road conditions and traffic congestion, they still did not view driving as a mere means of transportation or an intermediate step, but rather as an important part of a short vacation. The trip itself is part of the destination, lying within the same emotional geography as the destination.

Self-drive tourists often perceive themselves as "travelers," rather than "tourists," and tend to prefer "authentic experiences" and "local information" over "touristy" experiences (Taylor and Prideaux, 2008). Zhou and Huang (2016) explored self-driving travel motives among travelers in China and found that the natural attractions and fresh air experienced during the trip were direct motivators, while relaxation, independence/privacy, and enjoyment of convenience were potential motivators.

Butler et al. (2022) investigated the participation of rural South Australia in domestic tourism during the pandemic and the factors influencing travel, revealing that self-drive tourism was used as a means of (re)building connections with friends and family, as well as to enhance well-being by inducing positive emotions associated with a sense of adventure and discovery. Car use also provided flexibility in both choosing the destination and avoiding crowded or tourist-filled destinations.

Some studies have focused on the meaning of the "car" itself for tourists, pointing out that in the context of tourist mobility, it transforms from an "empty space" to a symbolic "home space" (Urry, 2006; Yang, Xu, and Hannam, 2022). For example, Yang, Xu, and Hannam (2022) examined Chinese road trippers' leisure automobile travel from the ontological premise of a "human vehicle" and discovered that they inhabit the car in four ways: driving, gazing, listening, and communicating. Through this embodied residence, the car is transformed into a "tourist residence" ("home away from home") space that protects them and evokes tourist sentiment, social interaction, and tourism meaning. While the use of the car reinforces autonomy and a sense of freedom through the choice of travel routes, it also provides a sense of safety to the tourist as a "shelter in a strange outside world," as well as a compulsion to communicate with fellow travelers.

In self-drive tourism, the ease of driving in a natural environment, the freshness of a new travel environment, the tension of facing an unfamiliar driving environment, and the enjoyment of interacting with fellow travelers enrich tourists' emotional experiences (Yang, Xu, and Hannam, 2022). However, the effect of these experiences on tourists' transformation is unclear. Therefore, this study aims to identify what motivates self-driving tourists and facilitates their transformation during their trips.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

This study used a descriptive and interpretive narrative approach for data collection and analysis through a semi-structured interview survey. The narrative approach assumes that life is shaped by narratives and parallels the way individuals are asked about their experiences (Cohler, 1982). It has also been proven in previous studies (Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai, 2016; Noy, 2004; Pung and Chiappa, 2020) that qualitative research is appropriate for ascertaining a person's transformation in the context of their tourism experience.

Individuals who had experienced a transformation in self-driven tourism were selected for this study. The following criteria were used to select participants: first, they must have had at least two years of experience in self-drive tourism; and second, they must have demonstrated self-improvement through their experience.

Data were collected between July and September 2024. A preliminary questionnaire was administered to 12 participants with experience in self-drive tourism to assess whether they had experienced a transformation or not; these belonged to communities involved in car modifications that regularly conduct self-drive tourism. Six respondents indicated that they had undergone transformational experiences; semi-structured interviews were conducted to delve deeper into the details of these experiences (Table 1). The interviews were conducted either in person or online, lasting approximately 60 minutes. They were conducted in the form of reflective questions centered on the participants' past experiences of self-drive tourism. Specifically, we asked questions such as, "What factors prompted you to transform yourself?" "What events prompted you to transform yourself?" Verbatim transcripts were analyzed after obtaining confirmation from the participants.

Table 1: Details of interviewees

Participant	Gender and age	Nationality	Occupation	Years of self-drive tourism experience	Transformation experience (Yes/No)
A	F/36	China	Company employee	5 years	Yes
B	F/52	China	Housewife	7 years	Yes
C	M/43	China	Teacher	5 years	Yes
D	M/25	Japan	Student	2 years	Yes
E	F/28	Japan	Company employee	3 years	Yes
F	M/23	America	Company employee	3 years	Yes

3.2 Data Analysis

This study analyzed data from interviews using Steps for Coding and Theorization (SCAT), an analytical method that is effective for analyzing small qualitative datasets. SCAT provides clear procedures and explicit descriptions of the course of the analysis (Otani, 2011, translated by author).

SCAT involves four coding steps: identifying key terms in the data; generating external terms to paraphrase key terms; providing explanations for key terms; and identifying themes or constructs that emerge from the data (Otani, 2011, author’s translation). The interview responses were coded, relationships between the codes were identified, and three common categories were derived: forced reflection and communication in a confined space, enhancing tourism experiences through problem-solving, and the interconnectedness of experiences across multiple destinations.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, providing a clear explanation of the study’s objectives, methods, potential risks, and benefits. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To ensure participant anonymity, personally identifiable information was removed from all datasets during transcription and analysis. Unique identifiers were used to link data while maintaining confidentiality. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in encrypted digital formats, following institutional guidelines and relevant legal regulations. Data access was restricted to authorized research team members. After the project’s conclusion, all data and backups were securely destroyed by a certified data destruction service to prevent unauthorized access. This destruction process was documented to ensure compliance with ethical and institutional standards.

4. Findings

4.1 Forced Reflection and Communication in a Confined Space

The interviews revealed that tourists participating in self-drive tourism could be classified into three types: planners, doers (drivers), and those who simply enjoy the experience. Planners are responsible for devising the destinations and routes for self-driving tours. Drivers drive according to these plans and, in some cases, make suggestions regarding the routes and destinations. Often, the driver doubles as a planner. Finally, there are those who neither plan nor drive, but enjoy sightseeing; such tourists also play a role in providing feedback to the planner and driver through in-car communication.

In the limited space of a car, the participants play their respective roles and communicate closely with each other, reflecting on each other’s experiences and plans before moving on to the next project. In this process, they discuss questions such as “Why was this destination or route chosen?” and “Why was another option not chosen?” based on their senses, deepening their understanding of each other. [A7: I usually drive, while my wife is in charge of overall trip planning. I feel that I am gradually getting a clearer image of my own favorite places through communication with my wife during the trip.] Through such communication, some participants said that they were able to confirm for the first time the differences in their senses with others and learn new aspects about their family members. These new perceptions function as factors promoting self-improvement.

4.2 Deepening the Tourism Experience Through Troubleshooting

As per many interviews, the most memorable experiences of self-drive tourism were related to problems. Examples include flat tires, theft, getting lost, and illness. These issues add an element of uncertainty to tourism; however, by solving them, the tourism experience becomes more authentic. [C3: On the way to Tibet, I developed a high fever due to lack of oxygen. The scenery outside the car window was beautiful but I was not in the mood to see it. I felt like I was going to die. Many things started to come to mind, and I got off the car and was admitted to the hospital; after experiencing this, I feel like I have discovered that there are many things that need to be done before I die; otherwise, it will be a pity.] In this process, they are forced to reconfirm the shortcomings and strengths of other tourists who have faced trouble together and are encouraged to transform. [D8: There was a time when the car's navigation system stopped working en route to the destination. Perhaps, we were passing through an area with a bad signal. When I was lost, my friend navigated me using a map, and I arrived safely. He always seemed lazy and unreliable, but I was surprised to see how dependable he could be when push came to shove.]

4.3 Interconnectedness of Experiences Across Multiple Destinations

Unlike other forms of tourism, self-drive tourism is characterized by multiple destinations. Due to this characteristic, unlike other forms of tourism wherein the experience concludes at a specific destination, self-drive tourism overlaps experiences across multiple destinations. Furthermore, by reflecting on the path to the next destination, it is expected that the experiences at multiple destinations will interact and be reflected in the next plan. This immediate cycle of thought and practice confirms new perceptions gained at each destination and facilitates the process of integrating them into oneself, thereby promoting transformation. [B11: During a long journey, each time you arrive at a destination, your memory of the previous destination resurfaces, and you compare them. Furthermore, by comparing with my life until now, something new has happened, and the world seems different.] In other words, in self-driven tourism, the experiences of multiple destinations can interact with each other through reflection during a journey, eventually resulting in transformation.

5. Discussion

This study's findings prove that self-drive tourism can promote tourist transformation. Furthermore, the study identified factors encouraging such transformations. Additionally, the interviews revealed several points that are consistent with the results of previous studies, such as Taylor and Prideaux's (2008), finding that self-driven tourists not only enjoy sightseeing, but also prefer more authentic experiences, such as making their own plans, exploring routes, and trying to solve problems. Furthermore, as revealed by Hallo and Manning (2009) and Zhou and Huang (2016), the purpose of self-drive tourism for many tourists is to "enjoy driving," "explore beautiful scenery," "spend time with friends and family," and "enjoy nature." However, this study's interview results revealed that, in addition to these purposes, there were also hidden objectives, such as identifying one's own shortcomings and strengths, including planning ability, problem-solving ability, and self-confidence. As revealed by Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai (2016), personal transformation in transformative tourism, characterized by increased existential authenticity and anxiety, is often induced during the trip, but usually manifests itself through post-trip reflection. Its hidden purpose can be fulfilled through the resolution of instabilities such as problems. However, one difference is that because self-driven tourism involves multiple destinations, transformation is induced during the trip and can manifest not only after the trip but also through reflection during the trip.

Furthermore, it was confirmed that many participants who experienced the transformation belonged to the same family. This is consistent with the findings of Butler et al. (2022) that "self-drive tourism is a place to (re)build connections with friends and family." Yang, Xu, and Hannam (2022) also revealed that the "car" functions as a "shelter against the unfamiliar outside world" and exerts a "compulsion to communicate" with fellow travelers, which is also consistent with the present results.

One of the limitations of this study is that cultural differences may influence the factors that trigger change when on the move. Although the sample size for this study was not very large, it consisted of tourists from three countries: China, Japan, and the United States. In the interviews, their more important motivations differed from each other, which may be due to cultural differences among the participants. Therefore, further research is needed to expand the sample size.

6. Conclusion

This study clarifies that tourists' experiences of self-drive tourism promote self-transformation. The interaction of communication and response to problems in the limited space of the vehicle and the experience of visiting multiple destinations during the trip transform self-perception and relationships with others, providing a more authentic experience and promoting transformation. The results prove that self-drive tourism is a type of tourism that can promote tourists' transformation and suggest that it functions as a means for personal growth and transformation. Further comparisons with other types of tourism are required through more detailed surveys in future studies, which may help ensure the implementation of transformational tourism and facilitate the development of corresponding marketing strategies.

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