

## **The Transformative Learning Nature of Malaysian Homestay Experiences**

### **Abstract**

Travel can have a transformative power; that is, the possibility of generating deep change and impact on individuals' self while on vacation. Transformative experiences could impact travellers at different levels and influence their understanding and interpretation of reality. Moving on from theoretical concepts, such as transformative learning, free choice learning and experiential learning together with adoption of an innovative mobile-enhanced data collection methodology in the field, this study investigates the Malaysian homestay tourism experience and its transformative power. It presents a preliminary framework to generate a better understanding of the anatomy of transformative travel, postulating that immersive and co-created experiences could trigger transformative learning processes in travellers, thereby impacting on their knowledge, skills and attitude towards generating a differential understanding and possible interpretation of the reality.

Keywords: transformative experience, transformative travel, immersive experience, community-based tourism, purposeful travel.

## 1. Introduction

The ‘transformative power’ of travel experiences has always interested academics (Christie & Mason, 2003; Kirillova et al., 2017; Sheldon, 2020) and practitioners (e.g. Transformational Travel Council, 2018; Skift, 2018). Recently, a series of research papers gave the transformative power of travel more academic substance. Examples of this are the one from (i) Wolf, Ainsworth, and Crowley (2017), who discussed transformative travel as a strategy for protected areas; (ii) the one from Coghlan & Weiler (2018), who discussed the transformative process during voluntourism experiences; and the one of Neuhofer, Celuck and To (2020), who studied transformative experience design in festivals. The body of knowledge built by these works and similar ones, contributed to including the transformative power of travel on academics’ agenda.

However, discussion about transformative travel and the associated concept of transformative economy dates back to the end of the previous century. In fact, Pine and Gilmore had already predicted the shift towards a ‘transformative economy’ in 1999 as a natural evolution and continuation of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), posing the basis for this new research domain. In the last three decades, travel and tourism academics engaged in the field, presenting a series of conceptual papers (e.g. Bruner, 1991; Sheldon, 2020) and structured review papers (Wolf et al., 2017). A few quantitative papers (Voigt et al., 2011) and a rich batch of qualitative researches, focused on predictions and descriptions of the transformation process (i.e. transformation seen as a process - in long distance walking - rather than as an end - Saunders et al., 2013). Most available research considers the individual as the unit of analysis in experiences such as backpacking (Noy, 2004) and investigates the transformation triggers (Kirillova et al., 2017) and process after a travel experience has been lived (e.g. Kottler, 1997). In this context, it is worth mentioning the works of Brown (2009), Noy (2004), Saunders, Liang, and Weiler (2013), Coghlan and Weiler (2018) and Neuhofer

and colleagues (2021) who investigated the transformation process in contexts, such as international sojourns, backpacking, long distance walking, voluntourism and festivals respectively. These research contributed to the development of the empirical basis of transformative travel literature. Additionally, recent literature started to consider transformative travel as a key strategic element to foster the development of the whole travel and tourism field where products and experiences can be designed to support this inner awakening and transformation towards the creation of the traveller of the future (Sheldon, 2020). Additionally, literature shows a variety of theories used to tackle and analyse post-experience narratives of transformative travel experiences (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018) with psychology (e.g. Neuhofer et al., 2021) and education (e.g. Brown, 2009) among the most common theoretical underpinnings.

This research aims at studying a specific experience with the transformation process in-the-making. The paper focuses on community-based experience in homestays (Gan et al., 2016) and leverages education literature theories (Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, & Benckendorff, 2012; Taylor, 2007) to generate a better understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, moving on from the work of Wolf, Ainsworth, and Crowley (2017), this paper adopts the lens of education science to discuss transformative travel as a tool used to empower community-based tourism (Walter, 2016) in homestays. Specifically, the research aims at investigating circumstances in which a travel experience can become a transformative learning experience and what is learnt by travellers during this experience. With a multi-racial and multi-cultural population, Malaysia provides a rich backdrop for this study with many opportunities for inter-cultural encounters between travellers and locals. The Malaysian homestay programme (i.e. <https://www.tourism.gov.my/niche/homestay>) was chosen for its immersive experience which provides authentic cross-cultural interaction, an excellent context for transformative learning

whereby travellers stay with host families and engage in daily cultural, economic and social activities with the community in the village.

Data were collected on site through self-reported, unstructured video interviews, enabled by a self-service digital device that allowed travellers to video-report their experience. Four homestays were chosen in Malaysia and a total of 124 individuals engaged in experience-sharing. The reported experiences were transcribed, translated and analysed following Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, and Benckendorff (2012), who presented a framework to better understand learning in tourism, and Taylor (2007), who discussed and revisited the elements of transformative learning theory.

In order to generate a better understanding of the underlying reasons for choosing this theoretical angle, which is seen as complementary with respect to the published work on transformation and psychology (Kirillova et al., 2017; Neuhofer et al., 2020), the following section discusses relevant work previously carried out in the field, before proceeding to discuss the methodological process and key findings of this research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *The interplay between learning and tourism*

It is now widely acknowledged that learning extends well beyond formal education and structured contexts; less structured learning contributes to individuals' development (Pitman et al., 2010) and happens in different and often unexpected settings during an individual's life. As Broomhall and colleagues (2010) highlighted, travel and tourism is one of the most interesting contexts where learning could happen because individuals are prone to challenge their 'comfort zone' while travelling, thus enhancing the possibility of discovering new and unexpected realities and customs (Werry, 2008). This is especially true when considering the increasing popularity of active and non-traditional forms of tourism (as opposed to escape-oriented experiences, since some commentators are sceptical about their transformative power – e.g. Cohen, 1979). This manifests as tourists engaging and connecting with local people and/or organisations, enhancing the possibility of participating in formative practices (Bos, McCabe, & Johnson, 2015). In fact, learning through travel could be deliberate and premeditated (e.g. study-abroad experiences – Brown, 2009) or it may be an incidental or even unintentional outcome of the travel experience (Mitchell, 1998). As underlined by Falk and colleagues (2012), learning is not always an active process; on the contrary, considerable learning occurs passively and unconsciously and is often driven by emotions (Turner, 2000).

In conceptualizing how travel contributes to learning, Falk and colleagues (2012) leveraged Aristotle's framework of (i) *techne* – practical skills, (ii) *episteme* - knowledge and (iii) *phronesis* – practical wisdom (or attitude), creating an orthogonal matrix featuring passive and active modes of learning. They provided evidence of research in travel and education fields, identifying the need for more studies in the domain because the learning outcomes of travel cannot be adequately described by merely understanding the 'content' of the tourism site

being visited or the design of the educational offerings presented (Falk et al., 2012). Learning outcomes from a tourism experience can include changes in skills (*techne*) and knowledge (*episteme*) of tourists or longer-term practical changes in tourists' behaviours and attitudes (*phronesis* - Bos, McCabe, & Johnson, 2015).

Additionally, tourism can be linked with two core educational theoretical models that fit properly in discussion of the contribution of tourism to life-long learning (Walter, 2016). Firstly, free-choice learning is a learning experience characterized by a reasonable amount of choice and control over 'what', 'where', 'when', 'with whom' and 'why' it is learnt (Falk et al., 2012). Secondly, experiential learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation provoked by experience (Kolb, 1984).

## **2.2 *Free-choice learning and experiential learning***

Free-choice learning and experiential learning are two concepts often used to discuss life-long learning (Candy, 1991).

- Following Falk (2006, p. 270), "free-choice learning is used to refer to the type of learning that occurs when individuals exercise significant choice and control over their learning. Free-choice learning typically, but not necessarily, occurs outside school". Academics started to use this concept to overcome the reductionist distinction of learning experiences in formal, non-formal and informal settings (Eshach, 2007). In fact, besides considering only the physical setting and institutional philosophy, this concept allows us to put the learner and her/his motivations and interests at the centre of the learning experience (Brody & Tomkiewicz, 2010). Free-choice learning can be understood in opposition to the top-down, institutional-driven view of learning; it is actually a new vision of the experience that is bottom-up and individual-driven (Falk, 2005). This type of learning often happens in environments that facilitate the

opportunity to see and do new and interesting things (Rounds, 2004). Travel, especially with the new forms of niche tourism experiences and with practices related to aquarium and nature centres visits and national park tours, is one of the prominent environments where free-choice learning could actually happen (Falk et al., 2012).

- Experiential learning theory proposes four steps (Kolb, 1984); which are, (i) concrete experience, (ii) reflective observation, (iii) abstract conceptualization and (iv) active experimentation. By addressing all four modes (creating a sort of idealized learning cycle), learners can achieve new knowledge, skills and attitudes, or what in Aristotle (as used in Falk et al., 2012) is (i) *techné*, (ii) *epistémé* and (iii) *phronésis* (Bos et al., 2015). Kolb & Kolb (2005) also discussed the concept of learning styles based on perception and processing of knowledge during the learning cycle. While the process of adaptation to environmental circumstances is central to any concept of learning, the styles are a personal preference for one mode of adaptation and will vary from time-to-time and from situation-to-situation (Kolb, 1981). Additionally, experiential learning is seen as particularly relevant for travel and tourism as it is often associated with the disorientation caused by an encounter with a culture or environment ‘other’ than that of the learner (Morgan, 2010).

### **2.3 *Transformative learning in travel***

Moving on from the above literature, it is clear that scholars have often engaged in generating a deep understanding of how travel affects learning (Falk et al., 2012). However, the transformative effect of free-choice and experiential learning has only been discussed anecdotally within the literature and mostly conceptually (e.g. Bruner, 1991) or focusing on the ‘ex-post’ narratives of a few individuals (e.g. Noy, 2004). Transformative learning theory is “the process of using a prior interpretation to construct a new or revised interpretation of the

meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163). In other words, transformative learning theory can be described as the shift in one's assumptions and world beliefs (Mezirow, 1991) thanks to a given learning experience. Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning is a ten-stage model in which learners are confronted with a disorientation dilemma causing them to challenge and question their frames of references (Walter, 2016). Over time, researchers have criticized and developed Mezirow's (2000) theory, recognizing the role of emotions, intuition and imagination (Dirkx, 2001) and affective and spiritual dimensions (O'Sullivan, 2002), framing it towards a more social constructivist view of learning (Taylor, 2007). Taylor (2007) suggests there are three components of the transformative learning process:

- (1) *Self-reflection*: a conscious act of reassessing the sources and outcome of one's frame of reference (Taylor, 2007), challenging its validity through discourses with others with different viewpoints in order to arrive at the best possible informed judgement (Mezirow, 1991);
- (2) *Engaging in dialogue with others*: multiple interactions through dialogue and discourse can help individuals reflect on the truth, appropriateness and authenticity of their assumptions (Mezirow, 1991) and therefore initiate the transformation process by revealing assumptions about one's own culture and its relationship to others (Taylor, 2007);
- (3) *Intercultural experiences*: the exposure to another culture triggers the disorientation dilemma as a result of culture shock or the experience of an unfamiliar cultural, social, or natural environment (Cousins et al., 2009); in fact, exposure to new cultures can be stressful, causing individuals to question assumptions and beliefs (Taylor, 2007).



Over the years, transformative learning theory has been applied to a variety of learning experiences, such as the motivations of environmental activists (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003), natural resource and environmental management (Diduck et al., 2012) and adventure and sustainable education (D'Amato & Krasny, 2011), to name just a few. All these experiences have the disorientation dilemma that triggered the transformation process in common (Mezirow, 1991). This could also happen in the travel and tourism field (Morgan, 2011), especially in so-called travel niches, such as volunteer tourism (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018), ecotourism (Walter, 2016), religious tourism (Noy, 2004) and sustainable tourism (Wolf et al., 2017). These are where (i) encounter with the 'other' (Morgan, 2010) can trigger (ii) the disorientation dilemma (Mezirow, 1991) and (iii) start the process of shifting one's assumptions and world beliefs (Taylor, 2007).

#### ***2.4 A framework for travel as a transformative learning experience***

All learning happening during travel consumption could be considered (i) experiential due to the inner characteristic of the travel product as it fosters the encounter with other cultures and people (Morgan, 2010) and (ii) with free-choice, given the high degree of control travellers can have on the actual experience they are living (Falk, 2006). On the contrary, not all travel experiences could be considered transformative (or have the same transformative power); as Bruner (1991) maintains, in several situations, travellers do not really enter into contact with local people as, for example, they do not speak the language and/or they are just living a closed experience where what is presented to them confirms their expectations. Therefore, the first research question is: *under which circumstances does free-choice, experiential travel learning become a transformative learning experience?*

Additionally, despite the claim that travel contributes effectively to learning (Falk et al., 2012), there is scant evidence in the literature about the effective contribution of travel

towards the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes of travellers (Scarnici & Pearce, 2012). Although anecdotal evidence exists about the general contribution of travel to these three aspects (Brown, 2009 - with reference to educational tourism), no previous research codifying the different aspects of knowledge, skills and attitude in travel has been published. Therefore, the second research question is: *what do tourists learn during a transformative travel experience?*

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1 Research Rationale**

In order to address these two research questions, the niche and emerging travel experience of Malaysian homestay tourism (Gan et al., 2016) was chosen. Homestay is a community-based tourism experience (Sebele, 2010) where the rural host community engages with guests, creating the possibility of triggering the disorientation dilemma described by Morgan (2010). In community-based tourism, communities host visitors in their homes, manage activities for tourists and receive most of the profits from these ventures (Richards & Hall, 2000). This allows communities to take control of their development, make decisions through consensus and enables all parties involved to receive equitable shares of the benefits (Pearce, 1992). Launched in 1995, the Malaysian homestay programme is an example of community-based tourism, comprising more than 200 clusters of villages and 4000 operators throughout the country. It developed from grass-root initiatives, along with governmental support and endorsement through capacity building and publicity. Statistics from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (2018) indicate that, in 2017, homestays welcomed 382,961 visitors, including 61,846 foreign visitors.

Community-based tourism in many parts of the world is one of many economic activities conducted in rural communities and is part of a diversification strategy (Tao & Wall, 2009). This is also reflected in Malaysian homestays, where communities are able to integrate multiple livelihood approaches and offer visitors a chance to engage with them, such as paddy farming, plantations, and small cultural enterprises and crafts. This provides a rich opportunity for visitors to encounter divergent elements which encourage learning experiences.

Homestay destinations in Malaysia are villages located in rural areas with communities involved in agriculture and fishing. Out of more than 200 clusters of villages, four communities were selected for this study. The selected locations reflect the diversity of locations within the country, cultural and economic activities, tourism experiences, size of operations and the composition of visitors in terms of their place of origin. All four homestays welcome local and foreign tourists throughout the year, with differing percentages of between 10% and 40% foreign visitors. These destinations were selected because of their prominence within the industry as homestays with a good track record and service quality, as well as being in different geographical locations within the country. Banghuris Homestay and Pachitan Homestay are in two different states, surrounded by oil palm, rubber and coconut plantations, whereas the Dorani Homestay is a paddy farming community; meanwhile, the Teluk Ketapang Homestay is a village located a short distance from the beach on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula. Guests can choose from a variety of engagement activities, including crop harvesting, food preparation, craft-making and leisure activities, such as fishing, traditional games or exploration of the village, during their stay. As they live in their host's homes, guests have their meals with the host families and spend time getting to know them.

Homestay managers were given information about the project and their agreement for collaboration was obtained prior to commencement of this study. The managers' support was essential to this study because they offered on-site logistical arrangement and invited respondents to record their experiences via the self-service digital devices provided for the study.

### ***3.2 Methodology***

The methodology was designed to address the following research questions: (i) *Under which circumstances does free-choice, experiential travel learning become a transformative learning experience?* and (ii) *What do tourists learn during a transformative travel experience?*

The study adopts a participant self-service approach in collecting qualitative data to explore these issues, drawing on the principles proposed by Moustakas (1994), which minimised the influence of pre-judgments and pre-suppositions in the investigation. The authors intended to explore the issues without bias and/or interference, allowing research participants to express themselves without constraints, reporting exactly what was relevant for them in the given context.

Accordingly, data collection was designed in an innovative way using tablet computers and a mobile application was designed (Figure 1) to explain the project and participants were asked to record a video reflecting on their experience. This data collection method allows self-administration by respondents using the tablet and, while commonly used in medical research to enhance respondent engagement (Abernethy et al., 2008; Pace & Staton, 2005; Pace & Staton, 2005; Wilcox, Gallagher, Boden-Albala, & Bakken, 2012), it has not been widely adopted in tourism research. This method reduces logistical burden, cost and missing responses in data collection compared to traditional methods (Seebregts et al., 2009) and allows more flexibility by tailoring questions to respondents based on their responses to earlier questions. To overcome challenges associated with internet connectivity at each location, instead of cloud-based storage for the tablets, data were stored on SD cards within the tablets and extracted periodically by the researchers throughout the data collection period.

Four tablets were delivered to the selected homestays along with instructions for the homestay managers. At the end of their experience (i.e. during the checkout), homestay guests were asked to participate in the project. The mobile application presents an initial screen with

an introduction to the project and all related information. Participants were then asked for explicit consent before details about confidentiality and use of the data were presented and a series of profiling questions were asked. Lastly, the participants were asked to record a short video (3 minutes maximum) about their learning experience at the homestay. A single, broad open question was used: ‘What have you learnt or gained from this homestay experience?’.

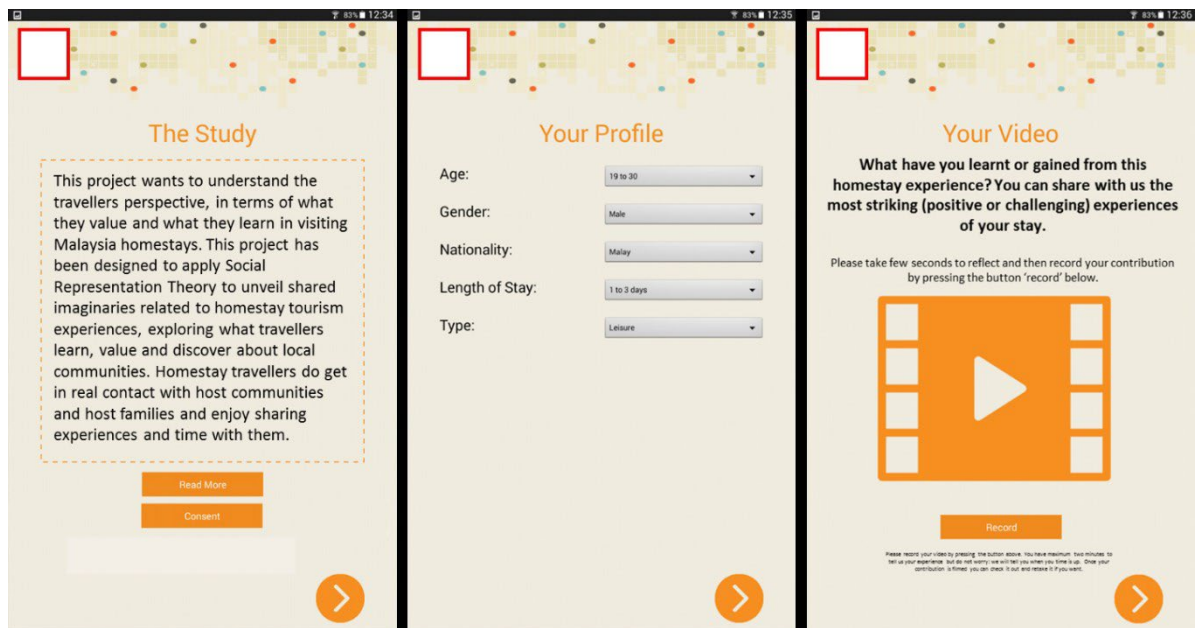


Figure 1: App design (i) project presentation, (ii) consent form, (iii) profiling form, (iv) video recording tool

Data collection lasted 6 months. A total of 124 individuals participated in the data collection in four different homestays. 14 observations were discarded due to technical problems (i.e. no video recorded) or individuals withdrawing from the interview. Videos were downloaded, transcribed and translated into English.

Transcriptions were first explored with a computer-based content analysis tool, Iramuteq (<http://www.iramuteq.org/>), by performing a semantic similarity analysis (Levidow & Upham, 2017). This technique was developed by Flament (1981) in order to investigate the proximity and relations among elements (i.e. lemmas) of a given cluster of content. The corpus

was first analysed for semantic similarities (Flament, 1981) to (i) examine lemma frequency within the answers and (ii) assess key lemmas' proximity. Semantic similarity measures proximity by calculating a contingency coefficient between the elements of the cluster, which is called a similarity index (Flament, 1981). The semantic similarity analysis has, as output, a connected and cyclical graph, in which all elements are linked together and there is only one way to move from one element to another (Clemence, Doise & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2014).

The corpus was then thematically analysed with Nvivo software by using a deductive coding approach moving from relevant theory (Taylor, 2007; Falk et al., 2012) to address the research questions.

### 3.3 Participants' Profiles

Table 1 presents the participants' profiles. There is a good balance between males (42%) and females (56%). The majority of respondents are aged between 18 and 39 years (89%) and have declared they have engaged in the homestay experience mostly with friends (82%). Most of them (69%) are locals. This gives the pulse of the actual experience as being for local young groups of friends.

<i>Profiling</i>			
<b>Gender</b>		<b>Travel Type</b>	
Male	42%	Family	4.50%
Female	56%	Friends	82%
Prefer not to say	2%	Family & Frie	13.60%
<b>Age</b>		<b>Nationality</b>	
18-29	77%	Malaysia	69%
30-39	12%	Other	31%
40-49	7%		
50+	4%		

Table 1: Participants' profiles

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Data Exploration

The semantic similarity technique produced a graph with interconnected lemmas: the centre of the graph is represented by a cluster built around the word ‘experience’, which includes content related to experiencing and enjoying the life of the community. This cluster is interesting because it shows that in the aggregated dataset of interviews, narratives about experience are central. Lemmas associated with this cluster characterize the experience (e.g. enjoy) and connect directly with two other clusters (cluster one and cluster two) where lemmas group around place characteristics and hosts’ characteristics respectively.

Particularly, looking at the clusters connected with the central group of lemmas, it is noted that:

- Cluster one stems directly from the central one, with the lemma ‘*nice*’ bridging the two; this cluster presents positive place characteristics with lemmas such as ‘*place*’, ‘*home*’ and ‘*enjoyed*’.
- Cluster two stems similarly from the central one, with the lemma ‘*all*’ bridging the two clusters; it presents lemmas related to people and family with whom they are acting within the experience. These are characterized in a positive way with lemmas such as ‘*beautiful*’, ‘*kind*’ and ‘*thank*’.
- Cluster three is a combination of three small clusters showing call to action with respect to the activity just experienced, often within a specific homestay, where tourists highlight behavioural intentions (e.g. ‘*visit*’, ‘*come*’) related to two clusters with the main characteristics of the two most popular homestays in our sample.
- Cluster four focuses mostly on time (e.g. *night and day*) but also on experience and on travellers (e.g. *our, us*) and with traces of intercultural exchange (e.g. *give and take*).



- Cluster five groups what tourists perceived to have “*learnt*” and “*got*” by interacting with the villagers; again, there is a positive connotation in this cluster of the experience related to experiencing the traditional life of the villagers and feeling welcomed and happy. This last cluster is then related to the main element that tourists appreciate to have learnt; that is, the culture of the village. Elements of cultural shock and intercultural experience emerge here, with lemmas in the cluster related to the differences between tourists’ own culture and the traditional Malaysian culture they experienced in the village. However, it also shows how homestay tourism is a collegial experience, which often involves travelling with companions, such as friends or families.

These five clusters represent the data contained in the interviews. Elements of Taylor’s (2007) classification can be found here with cluster two presenting aspects of engagement and dialogue with others, the core of the graph and cluster four presenting elements of self-reflection and, finally, cluster five presenting elements of intercultural encounter. Elements of Falk and colleagues (2012) can also be traced within Figure 2 with knowledge and skills being traced in clusters five and four respectively. Lemmization makes it difficult to scout for words related to the concept of attitude/practical wisdom; therefore, a deep qualitative analysis was conducted.

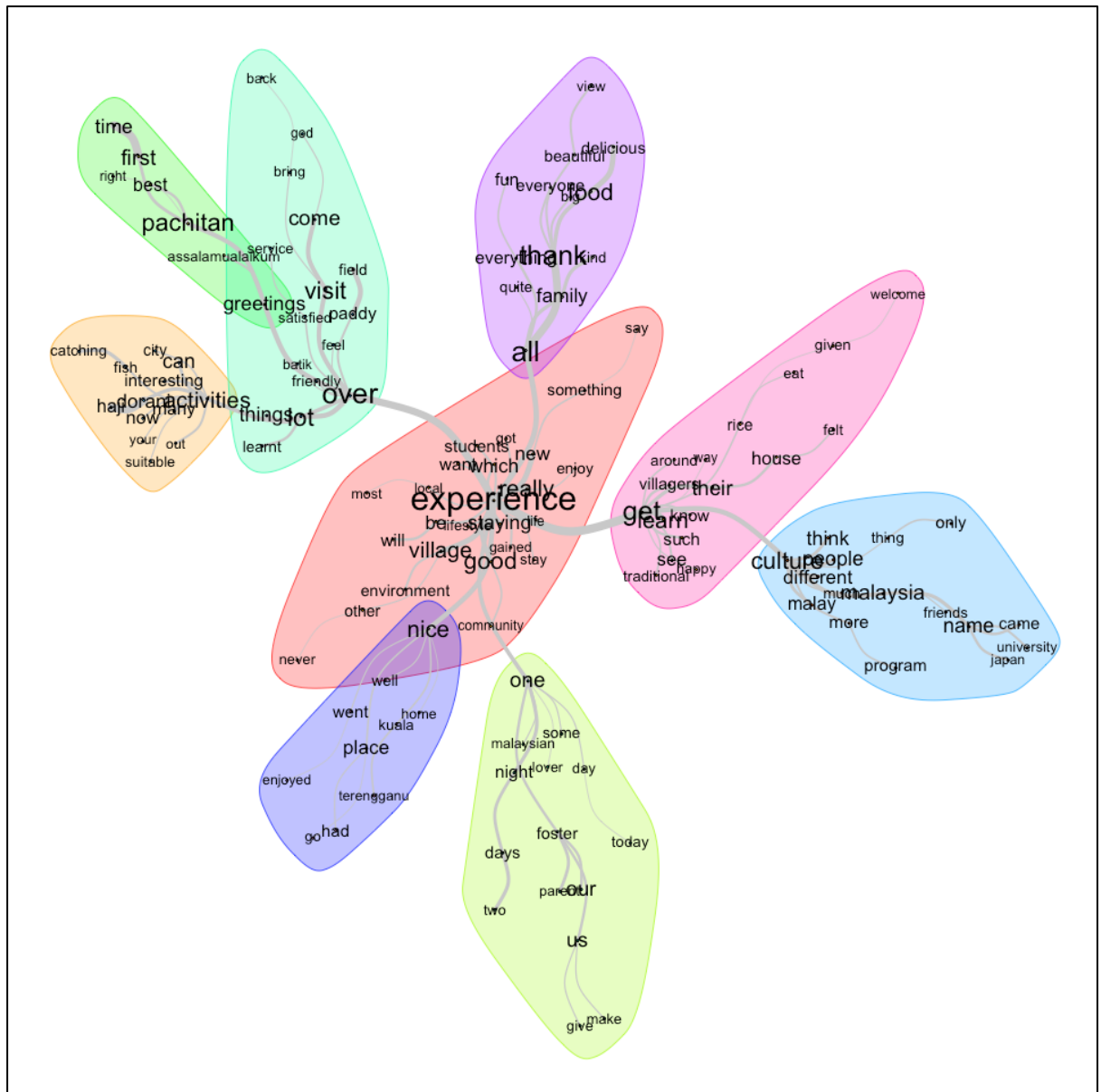


Figure 2: Semantic Similarity Analysis performed with Iramuteq (iramuteq.org)

#### ***4.2 Transformative Learning in Travel***

Qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed an interesting narrative for what concerns the transformative power (Falk, 2006; Taylor, 2007) of the travel experience under examination. Self-reflection was triggered by the comparison between the current experience (i.e. at the homestay) and the participants' daily life; the relationship with the host family was reported as the cornerstone for the engagement with the community. Additionally, informants reported that

communities were carrying out their normal routines (e.g. ceremonies etc.) as well as preserving their local traditions (e.g. food).

Participants were confronted with a series of different and immersive cultural initiatives, with the host family as the foundation of their experience which produced and co-produced an intercultural encounter; as informant #80 maintains: “[in the village] I get to do the same work with Tok Mah (elderly person)”. What transpires from the corpus is the strength of this experience, with effects that may last longer than expected. Informant #50 points out: “I really like it and I think everyone should get a chance to do something like this. It’s something really...how do I describe it...you won’t be able to, it’s something you will remember for the rest of your life and I think that it just gives you wider understanding on how the world is so diverse and everybody has different cultures and traditions and everyone should be understanding of that.”

The next sections give an account of the experiential and free-choice learning occurring within the homestay vacation, together with the transformative power of the homestay experience. It stresses the immersive and participatory angles with respect to the transformative learning components elaborated by Taylor (2007), namely self-reflection, engaging in dialogue with others and intercultural encounter.

#### *4.2.1 Self-reflection*

Self-reflection was essentially reported in two ways within the analysed corpus. Some interviewees stated they were impressed by the actual experience they were living at the homestay; as informant #3 stated: “I realized I had never appreciated to watch the corn cultivation” and asserted that this was absolutely a new and intriguing experience for them. Meanwhile, some others actually started to compare the experience they were living with their own culture; as informant #39 confirms: “Japan is different than Malaysia. In Malaysia, you

*eat with hands (eating with fingers in place of a spoon), while Japan is spoon eat, chopstick eat”.*

One common theme emerging within the interviews is the apparent difference from the city and from the life travellers experience at home and the one at the homestay, as informant #13 explains: *“The old lady and old pakcik (uncle), they grow a lot of this herbs and they are very friendly and when you come here also your hearts also be open. Not in the city, in the city, we always want to defend. [...] And then [...] you come here, you will express yourself, hearts will open”.* In general, most informants appreciated this contraposition as a possibility to actively reflect on their day-to-day preference.

#### *4.2.2. Engaging in dialogue with others*

One other element of reflection is the level of engagement offered by the homestay experience. Most participants in the study underlined their sudden closeness with the host families. The encounter with the family, the tradition they bring and the extensive communication generated an immersive experience that goes far beyond the actual tourism experience. As informant #90 confirms: *“[...] it’s nice to live in someone’s home and you learn, you know a lot more than just a pure tourist”.* It seems that the level of engagement offered by the family atmosphere acts as disruptive experience-changing relationships: *“I feel I have also built relationships with my host family, I can call him [the father] as an older brother”* [Informant #74]. Most informants described the experience as a *‘home away from home’* experience where they felt both immersed and also a part of a new culture. This is exemplified by a quote from informants #83 and #48 who confirm: *“[...] the homestay is not only for us to rent, but their villagers will act as our foster parents and treat us as their foster children.”* [informant #83] and *“[...] I felt like they were my real parents.”* [informant #48]. The families and other members of the community are often cited by participants both in relation to in-house cultural experiences and

experiences with communities. Engaging in a mutually rewarding dialogue with others is therefore a key element of the transformative homestay experience.

#### 4.2.3. Intercultural Experience

For many respondents, the homestay triggered a positive cultural shock caused by a series of exposures to the rural culture of the homestays. Some informants mentioned participating in unexpected events occurring during their time at the homestay; for example, informant #89 stated: “[...] then we went to see a Malay wedding and that I also enjoyed because I think this is the second time I’d been to a Malay wedding and I think it’s totally different.” Most informants were impressed with the warm welcome received at the homestay and with the traditional ceremonies performed by residents. The welcome with *kompangs* (Malay drums) is cited in several responses (#48, #50, #52, #54) and resulted in an unexpected experience “[...] we were welcomed by the villagers with *kompangs* (Malay drums) and we were so overwhelmed because we felt like VIPs.” [Informant #89]. Further, cultural nights where guests have to dress like community dwellers were highlighted in the self-reported videos: “We played the local instruments and also what I learnt the most is from the experience of being dressed in Malay clothes” [Informant 59] and “[...] we had a cultural night where we need to wear their *Baju Kurung* and *Baju Melayu* (Malay Dress) and they perform like *Joget Pahang* and something like that” [Informant 47].

Most informants mentioned the local food was an unexpected cultural element; meanwhile, personal judgements are expressed within the corpus. One quote from respondent #50 summarised this intercultural experience: “My first impression of *Nasi Ambang* was quite weird like why would you want to mix rice with noodles and food stuffs? But, in the end, we should not judge a book by its cover, we must taste first (laugh) and it was quite nice”.

### **4.3. Knowledge, Skills and Attitude Acquisition**

Throughout the corpus there is clear evidence of the different levels of learning homestay faced by guests. This section follows up Falk and colleagues' (2012) call for evidence of travellers' experiential learning during a vacation.

Regarding attitude development, the cultural encounter with homestay people supported development of attitudinal change; as confirmed by informant #51: *“The experience in this homestay is very beneficial, a life experience. We learn how to eat together, eat Ambang rice, learn about the culture of wearing the attires and there was live band from Komband (Kompang Band).”* The experience of togetherness helped other informants to reflect on the concept of relationships, such as that explained by informant #57: *“We got to see the relationships, how they greet each other like they greet like the older people, they like doing the head kiss thingy, that was really interesting.”* This is seen to have a deep impact on homestay visitors; as informant #50 confirms: *“[the experience] it’s something you will remember for the rest of your life and I think that it just gives you wider understanding on how the world is so diverse and everybody has different cultures and traditions [...]”*.

Tradition is a key point in discussing the acquisition of knowledge from travellers experiencing homestay hospitality; as respondent #76 points out: *“We are used to staying in the city, so now we get to experience the lifestyle in a village”*. The difference between their daily routines and the homestay culture is also a key factor for family visits; as two mothers confirmed: *“my purpose of bringing my daughter here to learn about the Malay culture and the Muslim culture”* [Informant 59] and *“I brought my son here, although my son is very used to the surrounding in the city, they are also very happy when they come here. They get to adapt to the environment because in this homestay, their house is clean and suitable for our lifestyle.”* [Informant 54]. Most informants actually pointed out that the community and, especially, the

host families, devoted time to explaining their history and traditions to them while welcoming them “[the] family introduced to us the history around this area, what happened, the British period and that historical knowledge also helped us understand more and really address our curiosity about the place, about Malaysia” [Informant 56].

Skills development also played a key role in the homestay experience. Different homestays proposed different activities, such as fishing, smashing the paddy, drawing *batik*, showering in the trough, catching fish with their bare hands, cooking, playing traditional games (such as flying kites and playing ‘coconut’ bowling) and so on. However, what is very interesting about the descriptions given by informants is the learning curve and the opportunity to leave their comfort zone, as the two following quotes explain: “I never tried fishing before this and there’s fishing activity over here, so I’m really proud because I finally tried fishing.” [Informant 74] “[...] and then [I] learn how to cook and then we engaged with the local people and it was a really humbling experience. I’m glad I came, even though I’m surprised [as] I wasn’t sure what to expect [...]” [Informant 60].

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The data presents evidences of the transformative power of travel (Falk et al., 2012), looking at the specific experiences of Malaysian homestays (Gan et al., 2016). It is clear from the data presented in the previous section that this experience triggered a transformation process (i.e. encompassing all the levels proposed by Taylor in 2007) which, in some individuals, has already reached a good awareness level (i.e. in terms of the outcome – see informant #50) while this process is somehow developing in other individuals. This is in line with the concept of transformation as a process, as proposed by Saunders and colleagues (2013). It appears that the active relaxation trend proposed by alternative forms of tourism effectively encourages learning (Bos et al., 2015). Through immersive engagement with the experience, travellers discover mutually-rewarding relationships, leading to a willingness to commit to something ‘other’ than their reality (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018).

This finding supports the criticism expressed towards Bruner's (1991) work by academics. Bruner (1991) posits that there is a lack of learning by travellers while on vacation due to linguistic, cultural and destination-specific barriers; on the contrary, the present research aligns with Bos and colleagues' (2015) claim of experiential and free-choice learning possibilities while on holiday. Therefore, in order to answer the first research question posed by this study, free-choice, experiential travel learning can be considered a transformative learning experience. This occurs when immersive and mutually-rewarding experiences trigger individuals' self-reflection, challenging their current lifestyle in a constant dialogue with others (i.e. in our case the host community and the host families) and generating intercultural experiences with a different degree of acceptance. The data show how this can cause individuals to question their assumptions and beliefs (Taylor, 2007).



Additionally, considering the actual learning process, the data show that travellers do learn something during a transformative learning experience, which addresses the study's second research question. It is again the immersive and relational nature of the transformative experience which enables the possibility of co-creating meanings with the data indicating that relationships and cultural exchange are mediators for attitude, knowledge and skill co-creation (Falk et al., 2012).

Therefore, pulling together all these elements (Figure 3), it is possible to assert that immersivity and co-creation support the transformative process in travel; however, it is not enough to be immersed in a community to actually co-create value with community dwellers. This is only achieved by triggering the key components of the transformative learning process, namely self-reflection, engaging in dialogue with others and intercultural experience exposure (Taylor, 2007) that free-choice learning, experiential learning and transformative learning can happen. This, at the core of the framework below (Figure 3), will have a direct impact on the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes in individuals (Falk et al., 2012).

Regarding the limitations of the current research, it is important to note that the quantitative content analysis was carried out on translated interviews; therefore, (i) in the Semantic Similarity Analysis (presented in figure 2) the translation of words could potentially reflect the English experience of the translator and could impact on the frequency analysis of the lemmas, and (ii) there could be a degree of interpretation in the translation effort of the interviews. However, the research team was aware of this inner limitation and tried to minimize the impact of this issue as one of the researchers is bilingual English-Malay.

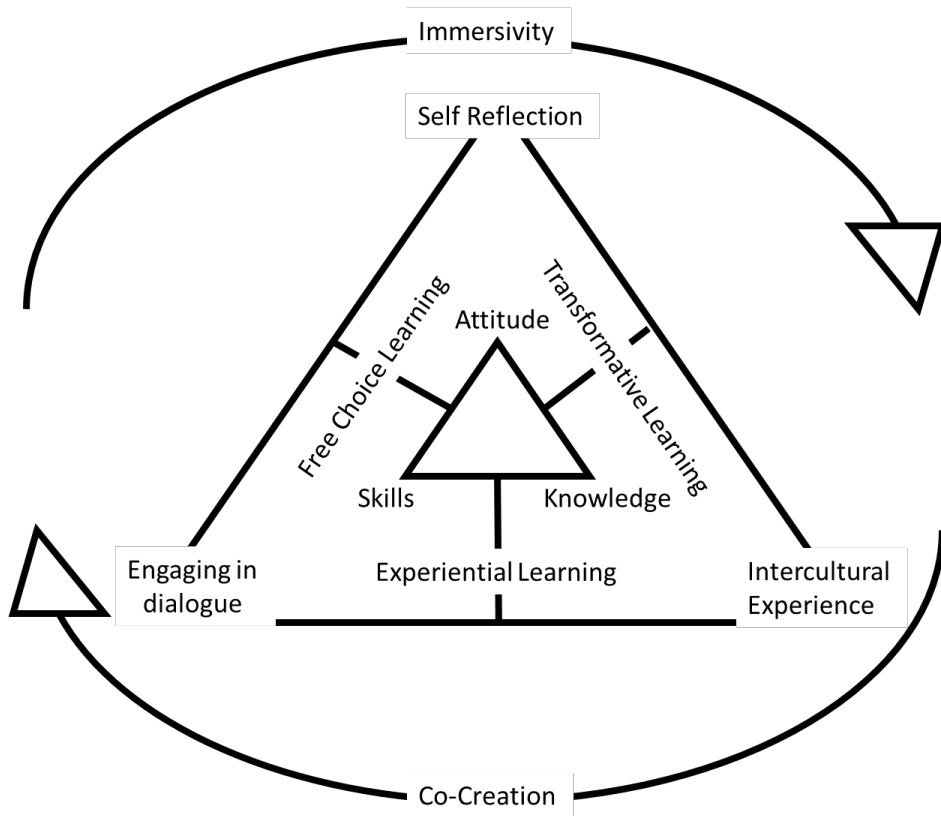


Figure 3: A framework for transformative travel

## 6. Future work

This work has been designed with an exploratory lens trying to unpack the transformative power of travel in the making – i.e. during the actual experience. Actually the transformative power of travel has been investigated by several different authors over the past years and is currently a cutting edge research topic (i.e. Sheldon, 2020; Neuhofer et al., 2021), embodying what Pine and Gilmore called transformative economy (Pine and Gilmore, 2013). The present work contributes to this ever growing body of knowledge with a precise theoretical angle that is the one of learning. Nonetheless, moving from the study here presented, authors envisage essentially two main avenues for future research:

- the first one concerns the current work, where thanks to (i) technology-driven data collection and (ii) a set of leaning theories (e.g. Mezirow, 1991; Flak, 2006), a framework to understand transformative travel has been proposed and needs to be validates to assess the interplay of the constructs presented in Figure 3, looking especially at the impact of immersive co-created experiences (e.g. Coghlan & Weiler, 2018) in transforming travellers' knowledge, skills and attitudes (Falk et al., 2012);
- the second research avenue, looking at the plethora of research produced in different travel niches - such as international sojourns (Brown et al., 2009), backpacking (Noy, 2004), voluntourism (Coghlan& Weiler, 2018) just to name a few - and with different theoretical background such as – for example - existential philosophy (Kirillova et al., 2017) or environmental psychology (Neuhofer et al., 2021), it is related to the definition of a common multidisciplinary theoretical landscape underpinning transformative travel.



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