

Articles – Tourism Management

An integrated approach to transformative tourism experiences and well-being in crisis contexts

Uma abordagem integrada das experiências turísticas transformativas e do bem-estar em contextos de crise

Un enfoque integrado de las experiencias turísticas transformativas y el bienestar en contextos de crisis

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Keywords:

Transformative Learning Theory;
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Well-Being Fluctuations;
Crisis Contexts;
Transformative Tourist Experience.

Abstract

This article analyzes how transformative tourism experiences relate to fluctuations in well-being in a crisis context. The study is grounded in Transformative Learning Theory and the PERMA model, adopted as theoretical-analytical lenses for understanding the processes of disorientation, self-reflection, and meaning-making experienced by tourists who traveled at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a qualitative study based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with Brazilian travelers, analyzed through content analysis. The results show that tourism experiences lived in crisis contexts are marked by fluctuations in hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, associated with well-being promoters and reducers, and that the transformative process does not result exclusively from the intensity of the events experienced, but from interpretive processes and the construction of meaning attributed by the tourists themselves. Based on the empirical findings, the study proposes a conceptual synthesis of transformative tourism experiences in crisis contexts, highlighting the non-linear and contingent nature of these processes. The article contributes to theoretical advancement by integrating transformative learning, well-being, and tourism in extreme situations, offering support for future research and relevant implications for tourism management in unstable contexts.

Palavras-chave:

Teoria da Aprendizagem Transformativa;
PERMA;
Oscilações no Bem-Estar;
Contextos de crise;
Experiência Turística Transformativa.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa como experiências turísticas com potencial transformativo se relacionam com oscilações no bem-estar em um contexto de crise. A pesquisa fundamenta-se na Teoria da Aprendizagem Transformativa e no modelo PERMA, adotados como lentes teórico-analíticas para compreender processos de desorientação, autorreflexão e construção de significado vivenciados por turistas que viajaram no início da pandemia da Covid-19. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, baseado em entrevistas semiestruturadas em profundidade com viajantes brasileiros, analisadas por meio de análise de conteúdo. Os resultados evidenciam que as experiências turísticas vividas em contextos de crise são marcadas por oscilações no bem-estar hedônico e eudaimônico, associadas a promotores e redutores de bem-estar, e que o processo transformativo não decorre exclusivamente da intensidade dos eventos vivenciados, mas dos processos interpretativos e da construção de significado atribuída pelos próprios turistas. A partir dos achados empíricos, o estudo propõe uma síntese conceitual das experiências turísticas transformativas em contextos de crise, destacando o caráter não linear e contingente desses processos. O artigo contribui para o avanço teórico ao integrar aprendizagem transformativa, bem-estar e turismo em situações extremas, oferecendo subsídios para pesquisas futuras e implicações relevantes para a gestão do turismo em contextos de instabilidade.

Palabras clave:

Teoría del Aprendizaje Transformativo;
PERMA;
Oscilaciones en el Bienestar;

Resumen

Este artículo analiza cómo las experiencias turísticas con potencial transformativo se relacionan con las oscilaciones del bienestar en un contexto de crisis. La investigación se fundamenta en la Teoría del Aprendizaje Transformativo y en el modelo PERMA, adoptados como lentes teórico-analíticas para

Contextos de Crisis;
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comprender procesos de desorientación, autorreflexión y construcción de significado vivenciados por turistas que viajaron al inicio de la pandemia de la Covid-19. Se trata de un estudio cualitativo, basado en entrevistas semiestructuradas en profundidad con viajeros brasileños, analizadas mediante análisis de contenido. Los resultados evidencian que las experiencias turísticas vividas en contextos de crisis están marcadas por oscilaciones en el bienestar hedónico y eudaimónico, asociadas a factores promotores y reductores del bienestar, y que el proceso transformativo no se deriva exclusivamente de la intensidad de los eventos vividos, sino de los procesos interpretativos y de la construcción de significado atribuida por los propios turistas. A partir de los hallazgos empíricos, el estudio propone una síntesis conceptual de las experiencias turísticas transformativas en contextos de crisis, destacando el carácter no lineal y contingente de estos procesos. El artículo contribuye al avance teórico al integrar el aprendizaje transformativo, el bienestar y el turismo en situaciones extremas, ofreciendo aportes para futuras investigaciones e implicaciones relevantes para la gestión del turismo en contextos de inestabilidad.



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1 INTRODUCTION

Travel is often conceived as a catalyst for significant personal change (Alahakoon, Pike & Beatson, 2021; Huang, Wang & Wu, 2023). The transformative potential of travel stems from its role as a learning tool (Walker & Manyamba, 2020), its capacity to promote well-being (Laing & Frost, 2017; Kirillova, Lehto & Cai, 2017a), and its ability to provide opportunities for reframing existential dilemmas (Alahakoon et al., 2021; Pung & Chiappa, 2020). Transformative tourism experiences are those that exert a lasting impact on an individual's attitudes, values, and behaviors (Amaro, Caldeira, & Seabra, 2025).

Research on transformation in tourism has evolved along five streams that examine transformative impacts from personal, social, service design, destination, and tourism-sector perspectives (Zoel, Schott & Campos, 2025). More recent studies on transformative tourism experiences have emphasized literature reviews (see Godovykh, 2024; Teoh, Wang & Kwek, 2021; Nandasena, Morrison & Coca-Stefaniak, 2022; Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023) and the development of theoretical models to analyze the phenomenon (e.g., Dieteren & Neuhofer, 2024; Neuhofer, 2025; Pung, Gnoth & Del Chiappa, 2020; Zhang, 2025; Zhao, 2025). However, studies that prioritize experiences in crisis contexts remain scarce.

Tourism experiences may generate identity-related and psychological transformations, particularly when they involve dilemmas, discomfort, and contexts of unpredictability (Kirillova, Lehto & Cai, 2017b; Pung & Chiappa, 2020). Such contexts, while challenging travelers' well-being, may also stimulate critical reflection on their values, choices, and relationships with the world (Milazzo & Soulard, 2024; Reisinger, 2013).

Within this context, Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), proposed by Mezirow (1978; 1991), stands out as a central theoretical approach for analyzing tourism experiences with transformative potential. According to the author, this process begins with a disorienting dilemma, which triggers a sequence of stages involving self-reflection, examination of assumptions, acquisition of new knowledge, development of skills, and ultimately the integration of a new perspective into one's life (Mezirow, 1991).

The literature identifies two main types of triggers for transformative experiences: destination-related elements (physical environment, services and activities, interpersonal interaction, and authenticity) and personal elements (cognition, confronting unfamiliar situations and challenges, special experiences, specific behaviors, and emotions) (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023). Although tourism literature frequently associates transformative experiences with positive change and personal growth (Huang et al., 2023; Pala & Cetin, 2022; Richardson & Insch, 2021), few studies have explored how negative, uncomfortable, and emotionally intense events, such as disruptions, fear, or frustration (Pung & Chiappa, 2020), may temporarily reduce well-being while also functioning as triggers for transformation (Schweiggart et al., 2025; Kirillova, Lehto & Cai, 2016).

The emotions and feelings elicited during travel are closely associated with both subjective well-being (Mayer et al., 2019) and psychological well-being (Ryff, Boylan & Kirsch, 2021; Kondja et al., 2024). Subjective well-being refers to the way individuals evaluate their lives, including positive and negative affects as well as cognitive judgments of satisfaction (Diener, 1984; Diener & Suh, 1997), and is traditionally associated with the hedonic dimension of experience. Psychological well-being, by contrast, is eudaimonic in orientation and emphasizes personal growth, purpose in life, and the realization of human potential (Ryff & Singer, 2008). In this perspective, the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) proposes five dimensions of human flourishing: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment, integrating elements associated with both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being.

Positive and negative fluctuations in well-being levels during travel, based on the dimensions of the PERMA model and subjective well-being, are influenced by the interconnection of factors referred to as well-being promoters and well-being reducers (Mayer et al., 2019). Further discussion is needed on how uncomfortable moments experienced during travel may also provide opportunities for reflection and transformation among travelers (Mayer & Coelho, 2021).

A particularly fertile setting for such experiences was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, the global health crisis rapidly disrupted mobility in more than 180 countries, directly affecting the tourism sector (Sigala, 2020). The need to cancel, postpone, or bring forward trips, combined with the uncertainty experienced during travel under restrictive conditions, gave rise to boundary situations that affected many travelers both emotionally and logistically (Mayer & Coelho, 2021). These unexpected experiences, many of them marked by dilemmas and uncertainty, provide a fertile context for examining transformative learning and fluctuations in well-being.

This article proposes an innovative theoretical integration to analyze how transformative tourism experiences relate to fluctuations in well-being. The study draws on Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory as an analytical lens for understanding the transformations generated by the dilemmas encountered, and on the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) as a lens for identifying fluctuations in well-being associated with well-being promoters and reducers (Mayer et al., 2019).

The research focused on tourists traveling between January and March 2020, on the eve of the official declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, to understand how experiences of crisis and displacement contributed to transformative processes in individuals' perceptions of themselves and the world. This article seeks to address the gap in the literature regarding the limited number of theoretical approaches to understanding transformative tourism experiences (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023). As its central contribution, the study presents a conceptual synthesis of the Transformative Tourism Experience in crisis contexts, developed from the empirical findings and informed by dialogue with Transformative Learning Theory and contemporary approaches to well-being.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Tourism in crisis contexts

Tourism is widely recognized as an activity vulnerable to disruptive events, given its dependence on mobility, social interaction, and conditions of political, health, and economic stability (Rosselló, Becken & Santana-Gallego, 2020; Rocha & Silveira, 2021). Studies on crisis management in tourism demonstrate that external shocks, such as natural disasters, health crises, political instability, and conflicts, directly affect tourism dynamics by altering demand flows, travel patterns, and organizational structures (Paixão, Lima & Cordeiro, 2023; Smolčić Jurdana & Agbaba, 2025).

Crises in tourism are described as situations that threaten the safety, reputation, and continuity of operations of destinations and organizations, requiring structured strategic and communication responses (Coombs, 2021; Paixão et al., 2023). Regarding consumer experiences in crisis contexts, Tronvoll and Edvardsson (2022) argue that such situations should be understood through the interaction between structure and agency, as individuals do not merely react to environmental constraints but actively interpret the circumstances they experience. This perspective is particularly relevant to tourism, whose essence lies in experience.

Different types of crises produce specific impacts on the tourism sector. Natural disasters affect destination infrastructure and attractiveness, significantly influencing international tourism (Rosselló et al., 2020). Armed conflicts and wars affect tourism flows and travel decisions, altering mobility patterns and risk perceptions (Hu & Wang, 2025). Likewise, political instability and adverse social conditions influence destination choice and travelers' perceptions of safety (Grigoriadis et al., 2025). In urban contexts, public safety factors also shape perceptions of actual and potential demand, influencing tourism attractiveness (Tomé, 2018).

In the case of health crises, the COVID-19 pandemic represented one of the most dramatic episodes faced by contemporary tourism (Zhu & Dolnicar, 2021). Since its initial reporting to the World Health Organization at the end of 2019 and its subsequent declaration as a pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020), COVID-19 triggered mobility restrictions on a global scale, profoundly affecting political, social, and economic systems (Gretzel et al., 2020).

Sigala (2020) argues that the pandemic produced impacts greater than those of previous crises. Furthermore, pandemics differ from localized disasters in their prolonged, systemic effects, including economic losses, unemployment, and widespread psychological impacts (Bae & Chang, 2021).

In the Brazilian context, Mayer and Coelho (2021) analyzed the experiences of travelers who faced extreme situations between January and March 2020, during the early stages of the health crisis, highlighting trip cancellations, early returns, and the reconfiguration of travel plans. These documented accounts reveal not only the structural impacts of the crisis on tourism activity but also the subjective and emotional dimensions associated with experiencing extreme situations.

Thus, understanding tourism in crisis contexts requires recognizing that such events simultaneously affect organizational structures, mobility dynamics, and travelers' subjective experiences (Tronvoll & Edvardsson, 2022; Paixão et al., 2023). By situating the COVID-19 pandemic within this broader debate, the present study is based on the premise that tourism experiences lived amid disruption and uncertainty constitute a fertile field for analyzing fluctuations in well-being and potential transformative processes.

2.2 Transformative learning theory and its relationship with tourism

Transformative experiences in tourism are understood as experiences that promote lasting changes in the way individuals perceive themselves, others, and the world (Kirillova et al., 2017a; 2017b; Pung & Chiappa, 2020), implying a profound restructuring of values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Reisinger, 2013; Ross, 2010; Kirillova et al., 2017a).

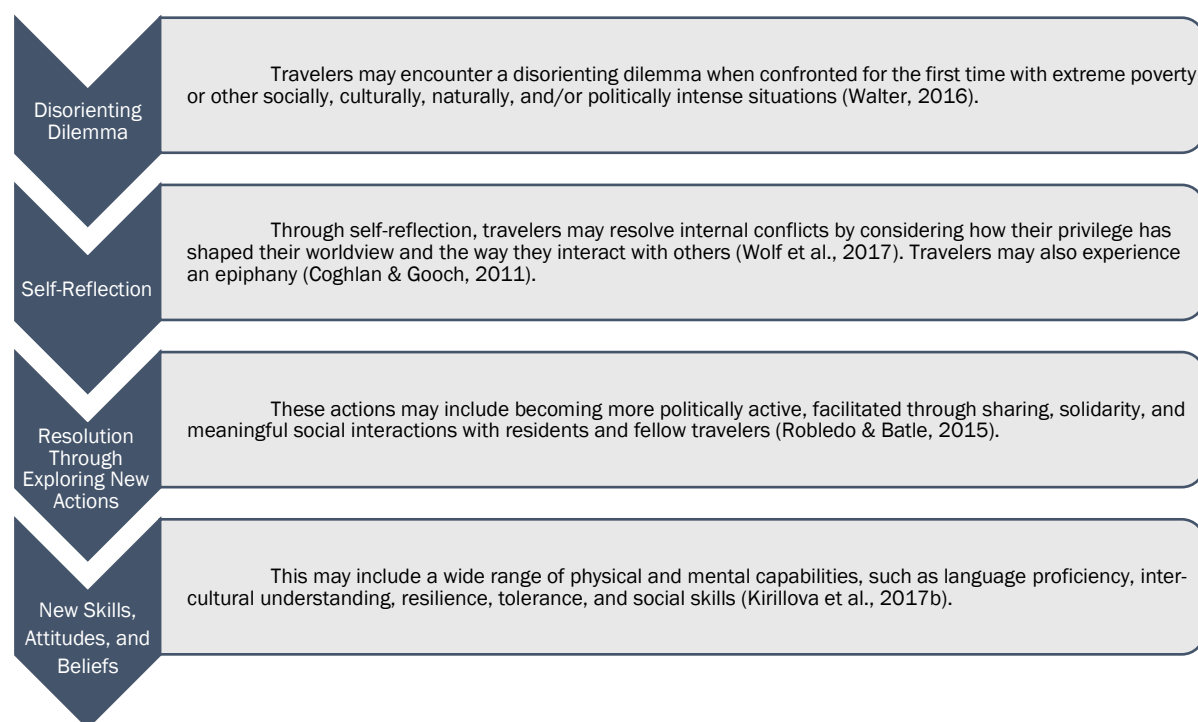
Mezirow's (1978, 1991) Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) has been widely applied in tourism as a theoretical lens for understanding such changes (Milazzo & Soulard, 2024; Kunwar & Ulak, 2024; Huang et al., 2023; Pung & Chiappa, 2020; Soulard, McGehee & Stern, 2019; Wolf, Ainsworth & Crowley, 2017). The process begins with a disorienting dilemma, an event that disrupts common assumptions and induces critical reflection. In tourism, such a dilemma may arise from language barriers, cultural shocks, unforeseen restrictions, or experiences of vulnerability (Pung & Chiappa, 2020; Reisinger, 2013), functioning as a trigger for the re-evaluation of assumptions and the reconstruction of the self (Walter, 2016).

TLT proposes ten stages: self-examination, critical assessment, recognition of the transformation process, exploration of new perspectives, planning a course of action, acquisition of skills, experimentation with new roles, development of competence, and ultimately a new way of viewing the world (Mezirow, 1978; 1991). In tourism, the theory is also associated with the development of intercultural awareness and competencies such as language learning, autonomy in travel planning, coping with stress, the use of technologies, resource management, and risk-taking (Kunwar & Ulak, 2024; Milazzo & Soulard, 2024; Tsaur & Huang, 2015).

Several studies have adapted these stages to better reflect the traveler's experience. The model proposed by Wolf, Ainsworth, and Crowley (2017) reformulates the transformative process as a TLT-grounded conceptual model that incorporates both triggers and outcomes and comprises four central dimensions (see Figure 1).

The transformative process proposed by Wolf et al. (2017) suggests that tourists experience a disorienting dilemma and, through self-reflection, may reach an epiphany and act differently (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). Transformative tourism, therefore, involves an inner journey that fosters awareness, expands self-knowledge, and encourages questioning about life purpose (Sheldon, 2020; Soulard et al., 2021; Neuhofer, Celuch & To, 2020). Its most promising principle is the potential to turn tourists into agents of change (Pung et al., 2019; Pung & Chiappa, 2020).

Transformations may be cognitive, behavioral, emotional (Pala & Cetin, 2022), or spiritual (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023), and are not limited to spiritual or volunteer tourism. They also occur in family travel (Fu et al., 2022), journeys to one's country of origin (Anschütz & Mazzucato, 2022), leisure travel (Coelho et al., 2025), and even in situations involving tourism service failures (Schweiggart et al., 2025). This demonstrates that emotional discomfort can play a legitimate role in tourists' transformation.

Figure 1 – Dimensions of Tourism Experiences Based on Transformative Learning Theory (TE-TLT)

Source: Adapted by the Authors (Wolf et al., 2017).

These findings reinforce the idea that transformations emerge from unexpected experiences, interactions with the “other,” and ambiguous emotions such as fear, frustration, guilt, or longing (Kirillova et al., 2016). For this reason, recent studies have increasingly focused on less celebrated aspects of tourism, such as failures, conflicts, and disruptions, viewing them as opportunities for meaning-making (Schweiggart et al., 2025; Mulcahy et al., 2023).

Linking Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) with the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) makes it evident that transformative tourism experiences directly affect subjective well-being. Challenging situations may temporarily reduce well-being; however, when reinterpreted and integrated into one’s life narrative, they can strengthen meaning in life, the sense of accomplishment, and interpersonal relationships (Filep, 2012; Huang et al., 2023).

2.3 The PERMA Model and Well-Being Fluctuations

Well-being has been studied from two related yet distinct perspectives: subjective well-being and psychological well-being. Subjective well-being is a scientific construct that examines how individuals evaluate their lives over time (Diener & Suh, 1997), encompassing emotions, satisfaction, and positive and negative judgments (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Diener, 1984). This construct comprises an affective dimension, involving positive and negative affects, and a cognitive dimension, referring to the evaluation of life satisfaction. It is traditionally associated with hedonia, which is linked to pleasure and happiness (Vada, Prentice, & Hsiao, 2019).

In contrast, psychological well-being is grounded in the Aristotelian concept of eudaimonia, which relates to personal growth, the realization of human potential, and the attribution of meaning to experiences (Heintzelman, 2018; Ryff & Singer, 2008). This eudaimonic foundation of psychological well-being focuses on optimal functioning and human flourishing and is operationalized through six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth, the latter being most directly associated with eudaimonia (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Thus, while subjective well-being is predominantly aligned with hedonia, psychological well-being is rooted in eudaimonia, reflecting two complementary perspectives on the human experience of well-being.

The literature recognizes that hedonia and eudaimonia are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary in understanding well-being (Hanley, Warner & Garland, 2015; Buecker et al., 2023; Das et al., 2020; Diener, 1994). In this regard, the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) proposes five dimensions of human flourishing: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Each of these dimensions may be activated or

compromised during travel experiences. Emotions may be affected by cultural shocks (Kirillova et al., 2016); insecurity or fear may reduce engagement (Mayer et al., 2019); conflicts may undermine relationships (Pala & Cetin, 2022); inequalities may generate existential discomfort (Anschütz & Mazzucato, 2022; Soulard et al., 2021); and frustrations may diminish the sense of accomplishment (Schweiggart et al., 2025).

In this way, the PERMA model contributes to understanding emotions and outcomes in tourism experiences (Filep, 2016; Seligman, 2018; Huang et al., 2023). A dynamic perspective of well-being is adopted in this study, considering its fluctuations as influenced by well-being enhancers and detractors (Mayer et al., 2019). Such variations, even when uncomfortable, may foster transformative processes. Mayer et al. (2019) demonstrated that these fluctuations are driven by personal, social, and environmental factors (Coelho, Gosling & Almeida, 2018), as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – Promoters and reducers of Well-Being During a Trip Based on the PERMA Model

PROMOTERS OF WELL-BEING	Engagement (Flow Theory)	Activities that enable tourists to experience engagement through immersion.
	Building Relationships	Integration with the group and the development of positive relationships during travel activities.
	Meaning and Purpose	Activities that provide meaning and purpose to the travel experience.
	Accomplishment	A sense of personal accomplishment derived from the travel experience.
	Physical Structures and Natural Environments	Exposure to internal and external conditions associated with physical structures and natural environments.
REDUCERS OF WELL-BEING	Expectation Violations	Disappointments, unmet promises, poor service, and delays.
	Interpersonal Conflicts	Misunderstandings, rude or offensive treatment by local residents or other members of the travel group.
	Stressful Environments	Stressful, unhealthy, or uncomfortable environments.
	Exhaustion and Fatigue	Physical and mental exhaustion caused by excessive activities or poor sleep quality.

Source: Adapted by the authors (Mayer et al., 2019).

Activities and events that promote well-being trigger positive feelings, such as joy, satisfaction, excitement, contentment, and affection, which contribute to increased levels of well-being. Conversely, activities and events that reduce well-being trigger negative feelings, such as sadness, anger, frustration, dissatisfaction, and discouragement (Mayer et al., 2019).

Thus, integrating the dimensions of the PERMA model into the analysis of transformative travel experiences makes it possible to understand tourism as a domain in which well-being is simultaneously challenged and nurtured. The perspective proposed here adopts a broader view by recognizing discomfort, rather than excluding it, as a legitimate and potentially productive component of the process of personal transformation.

3 METHODOLOGY

To analyze how transformative tourism experiences relate to fluctuations in well-being, this study focuses on the initial phase of the COVID-19 outbreak, a period when uncertainty and risk permeated travelers' experiences. Given the need for an in-depth understanding of travelers' experiences and perceptions, a qualitative approach was adopted (Creswell & Inoue, 2025). To achieve the proposed objective, two methods were employed: in-depth semi-structured interviews with tourists who traveled during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and content analysis to code and interpret interview data.

The methodological choices were guided by the post-positivist paradigm and a deductive approach, drawing upon pre-existing theoretical categories for empirical analysis. This orientation enabled the integration of empirical evidence with the theoretical dimensions of Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and the PERMA model, ensuring consistency between the epistemological assumptions and the study's objectives.

Content analysis enables the description, interpretation, and understanding of the content of various types of documents and texts, allowing for systematic descriptions of materials derived from both verbal and nonverbal communication (Bardin, 1977, 2011). According to Bardin (1977), content analysis comprises the following stages: (1) pre-analysis, consisting of the selection of the material to be analyzed; (2) coding, which transforms raw data into units of analysis to be grouped; (3) categorization, which organizes the coded material according to defined criteria; and (4) data interpretation. All these stages were employed in the present study. In addition, NVivo software was used to organize and manage the interview data.

3.1 Participants and semi-structured interview guide

Study participants were selected using the snowball sampling method. To recruit volunteers, a visual invitation and a video were distributed via WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Participants met at least one of the following criteria: (a) they experienced disruptions during an ongoing trip; (b) they were unable to return home as planned or had their return postponed due to mobility restrictions; or (c) they contracted COVID-19 while in a foreign country (Mayer & Coelho, 2021).

The detailed research project and the Informed Consent Form (ICF) were submitted through Plataforma Brasil for review by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) and were approved under Opinion No. 5,739,943. Accordingly, 17 interviews were conducted via Google Meet between August and November 2022. The interviews ranged from 21 minutes and 38 seconds to 32 minutes, with an average of approximately 28 minutes. The profile of the 17 participants who met the methodological inclusion criteria is summarized in Table 2. Pseudonyms were adopted in the analyses to preserve participants' identities.

Table 2 – General profile of the research participants

Name	Age	Occupation	Education Level	Place of Residence	Destination	Type of Trip	Travel Motivation
Mateus	24	Entrepreneur	Postgraduate Degree	São Paulo	Switzerland	Solo	Leisure
Ana	36	Sociologist	Postgraduate Degree	Pernambuco	Portugal, Spain, and Cape Verde	Couple	Leisure
Fábia	38	Advertising Professional	Postgraduate Degree	Paraná	Spain	Family	Religious
Lorena	25	Student	Incomplete Bachelor's Degree	Rio de Janeiro	United States	Solo	Work
Regina	42	Teacher	Postgraduate Degree	Rio de Janeiro	Veranópolis, Brazil	Solo	Visiting Family
Roberta	38	Hotel Professional	Bachelor's Degree	Maranhão	France	Solo	Leisure
Cecília	44	Entrepreneur	Bachelor's Degree	Pernambuco	England, the Netherlands, and Portugal	Couple	Leisure
Rodrigo	29	Self-employed	Bachelor's Degree	Federal District	São Paulo, Brazil	Couple	Visiting Family
Raquel	25	Designer	Bachelor's Degree	Rio de Janeiro	United States	Friends	Leisure
Valéria	27	Tour Operator	Bachelor's Degree	Maranhão	Argentina and Uruguay	Couple	Leisure
Marta	44	Self-employed	Postgraduate Degree	Rio de Janeiro	Itamaracá, Brazil	Solo	Visiting Family
Giovana	35	Civil Engineer	Postgraduate Degree	Rio de Janeiro	Jamaica	Couple	Leisure
Beatriz	25	Psychologist	Bachelor's Degree	Paraná	Matinhos, Brazil	Family	Work
Carla	23	Journalist	Postgraduate Degree	Maranhão	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	Family	Leisure
Ruan	25	Lawyer	Bachelor's Degree	Maranhão	Portugal, Italy, France, and England	Family	Leisure
Clara	49	Judge	Bachelor's Degree	Maranhão	United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Syria	Couple	Leisure
Sofia	39	Teacher	Postgraduate Degree	Maranhão	Apicum-Açu, Brazil	Work and Study Group	Work

Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

All participants completed the Informed Consent Form (ICF). Most participants authorized audio and video recording, while a minority authorized only audio recording. All participants consented to the dissemination of the results for academic research purposes. Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed and imported into NVivo for coding and categorization.

The semi-structured interview guide was organized around three main themes: (1) travel contextualization, aimed at identifying the travel period, destination, and travel companions; (2) the travel experience itself, seeking to understand the initial impact of the pandemic, how it affected the tourism experience, and which moments were most memorable; and (3) post-trip reflection, focusing on perceived consequences, reported learning outcomes, and the possible occurrence of personal transformations resulting from the experience.

3.2 Data Processing and Analysis

For data analysis, content analysis was adopted, grounded in the literature and aligned with this study's objective. The context units consisted of the responses provided by the interview participants, while the recording units used for code development were based on the theories and perspectives addressed in this study, namely:

- Dimensions of Tourism Experiences based on Transformative Learning Theory (TE-TLT) – Disorienting Dilemma, Self-Reflection, Resolution Through Exploring New Actions, and New Skills, Attitudes, and Beliefs (Figure 1);
- Promoters of Well-Being – Engagement, Building Relationships, Meaning and Purpose, Accomplishment, and Physical Structures and Natural Environments (Table 1);
- Reducers of Well-Being – Expectation Violations, Interpersonal Conflicts, Stressful Environments, and Exhaustion and Fatigue (Table 1).

During the categorization stage, the grouping process followed the dimensions derived from the theory and model adopted in this study, based on semantic criteria identified in participants' narratives. For example, within the category Disorienting Dilemma, the analysis sought to identify the initial impacts and adverse situations experienced during travel; within Promoters of Well-Being, the focus was on identifying aspects related to meaning and purpose; and within Reducers of Well-Being, attention was given to expectation violations as well as exhaustion and fatigue.

The coding and categorization process followed a deductive approach through directed content analysis, drawing on existing theories, models, and prior research to identify key concepts (categories) and codes (Rossi et al., 2014). Directed content analysis seeks to validate, refine, and extend existing theories through deeper empirical investigation (Rossi et al., 2014).

Table 3 presents the stages of the coding process, the theoretical dimensions, the codes employed, and the authors who provided the theoretical foundation for the analysis.

Table 3 – Coding stages

First Coding Cycle - Tourism Experiences and Transformative Learning Theory		
TE-TLT Dimensions	Authors	Codes
Disorienting Dilemma	Wolf et al. (2017); Soulard et al. (2019)	Initial Impacts
		Adverse Issues
Self-Reflection	Wolf et al. (2017); Soulard et al. (2019); Coghlan & Gooch (2011)	Internal Reflections
Resolution Through Exploring New Actions	Wolf et al. (2017); Soulard et al. (2019)	New Actions
New Skills, Attitudes, and Beliefs	Wolf et al. (2017); Soulard et al. (2019)	Learning and Transformation
Second Coding Cycle – PERMA Model		
Well-Being Dimensions	Authors	Codes
Reducers of Well-Being	Mayer et al. (2019)	Expectation Violations
		Interpersonal Conflicts
		Stressful Environments
		Exhaustion and Fatigue
Promoters of Well-Being	Mayer et al. (2019); Seligman (2011)	Relationships
		Meaning and Purpose
		Accomplishment
		Physical Structures and Natural Environments
		Engagement (Flow Theory)

Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

In addition to the coding stages, the recurrence of codes and their articulation with the literature review revealed an opportunity to integrate the dimensions of Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and the PERMA model through well-being fluctuations, represented by well-being promoters and reducers. This theoretical-analytical articulation

enabled the development of a conceptual synthesis that systematizes the study's main findings and constitutes the central theoretical contribution of this research.

4 RESULTS

Regarding the profile of the 17 Brazilian participants in the study, 14 were women, and 3 were men, with ages ranging from 23 to 49 years. With educational backgrounds in diverse fields, all participants held a bachelor's degree, and eight also held a postgraduate degree. All participants resided in Brazil, and the destinations visited included both domestic and international locations. Concerning the type of trip, six traveled as a couple, five traveled solo, four traveled with family members, one traveled with a work and study group, and one traveled with friends. Their travel motivations included leisure, work, visiting family, and religious purposes. All participants traveled between January and March 2020. More specifically, two traveled in January, two in February, and thirteen in March.

In questions concerning the course of the trip, participants were asked about their initial reactions to COVID-19 and how the virus affected their travel experiences, including the risks and difficult situations they encountered, as well as memorable moments related to leisure and well-being. The analyses are presented in the following sections.

4.1 Disorienting dilemma and reducers of well-being during travel: initial impacts and how the pandemic affected the experience

At the beginning of their narratives, participants described the immediate effects of the pandemic on their trips, including empty environments, mandatory mask use, flight and tour cancellations, border closures, lockdown measures, and denied accommodation (Baum & Hai, 2020). These episodes, coded as "initial impacts," were interpreted through the lens of the disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1978, 1991), as they disrupted travelers' expectations regarding their trips.

Participants also reported practical consequences, such as emergency flight changes, modifications to accommodation arrangements, entry restrictions, and increased health and safety protocols at destinations. These "adverse issues" intensified feelings of emotional alertness, generating uncertainty and a sense of loss of control. Such accounts reflect the structural changes experienced by the tourism sector during the pandemic (Mayer & Coelho, 2021; Prentice, Altinay, & Woodside, 2021).

Negative emotions such as stress, fatigue, frustration, and fear were identified as Reducers of Well-Being (Mayer et al., 2019). Participants' narratives also revealed interpersonal conflicts and negative experiences with service providers, including poorly managed travel agencies, abusive situations on cruise ships, and airline ticket scams, as discussed by Nickerson et al. (2020) and Mayer and Coelho (2021), as well as emotional impacts such as anxiety and anger (Tikhonova, Kim, & Butler, 2018). These events and illustrative excerpts are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 – Codes from the TE-TLT and well-being dimensions: initial impacts and how the pandemic affected the travel experience

TE-TLT Dimension Codes - Disorienting Dilemma	Well-Being Dimension Codes - Reducers of Well-Being	Excerpts from participants' accounts regarding the initial impact of COVID-19 and how it affected their travel experiences
Initial Impacts and Adverse Issues	Expectation Violations	"Flying over the beach, which is usually crowded, the beach was completely empty; there was not a single person." (<i>Marta, 44 years old, destination: Itamaracá, Brazil</i>) "I arrived on Friday and by Saturday, the very day I got there, people were already talking about border closures." (<i>Roberta, 38 years old, destination: France</i>)
Adverse Issues	Expectation Violations	"[...] security staff started preventing people from entering establishments [...]" (<i>Valéria, 27 years old, destination: Argentina and Uruguay</i>) "[...] then all of a sudden airports started closing, flights around the world were being canceled, and that was when the shock hit." (<i>Clara, 49 years old, destination: United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Syria</i>)
Initial Impacts and Adverse Issues	Stressful Environments	"The airport was crowded, extremely crowded [...]" (<i>Giovana, 35 years old, destination: Jamaica</i>) "I looked at the line and thought, 'there's no way, the line is enormous, I need to sleep, I need to eat' [...]" (<i>Ana, 36 years old, destination: Portugal, Spain, and Cape Verde</i>)
Adverse Issues	Exhaustion and Fatigue	"[...] we spent the whole day walking and, by the time we got close to our destination, we started to feel extremely tired." (<i>Fábia, 38 years old, destination: Spain</i>) "I started losing weight [...] I could barely eat, the fatigue was overwhelming [...]" (<i>Clara, 49 years old, destination: United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Syria</i>) "I had a sore throat and felt extremely fatigued [...]" (<i>Ruan, 25 years old, destination: Portugal, Italy, France, and England</i>)

Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

It is important to note that, from the perspective of Transformative Learning Theory, disorienting dilemmas may emerge from personal crises or extreme social contexts and can trigger processes of emotional self-examination,

critical reflection on assumptions, and reconstruction of one's worldview (Mezirow, 1991). In the present case, the pandemic functioned as a backdrop that amplified the tension between desire and responsibility, as well as between freedom and restriction, generating discomfort that subsequently created opportunities for reflection.

4.2 Self-Reflection and promoters of well-being: how the pandemic affected the travel experience

Even within an adverse context, participants highlighted positive aspects of their trips. They reported experiences of support and solidarity, such as assistance from fellow Brazilians in returning home, rides offered during critical situations, and accommodation provided by strangers. These interactions were interpreted as Promoters of Well-Being, particularly within the Positive Relationships dimension of the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), aligning with the literature on the role of interpersonal connections in tourism (Pung & Chiappa, 2020; Neuhofer et al., 2020). According to Mayer et al. (2019), such connections foster feelings of acceptance, support, and protection, which are especially important in uncertain contexts.

Another recurring theme concerned physical and natural environments. Many participants reported enjoying open and peaceful spaces, such as beaches, due to the absence of crowds. More than merely generating momentary positive emotions, these episodes appear to have contributed to the construction of meaning around lived experience, fostering self-reflection in a context of uncertainty. Perceptions of safety and freedom were also associated with relaxation, converging with studies that identify a preference for natural destinations in the post-pandemic period as a form of emotional self-regulation (Silva & Mayer, 2021; Zhang, Sun, & Lu, 2023).

Accounts of immersion in activities such as pilgrimages highlighted the Engagement dimension (Seligman, 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Many participants described themselves as deeply absorbed in their activities, disconnected from technology, and experiencing a state of flow (Wheatley & Bickerton, 2017; Tikhonova et al., 2018).

Representative examples of these experiences and the relationships among the codes are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 – Codes from the TE-TLT and well-being dimensions: how the pandemic affected the travel experience

TE-TLT Dimension Codes – Self-Reflection	Well-Being Dimension Codes – Promoters of Well-Being	Excerpts illustrating positive experiences reported by participants regarding how the pandemic affected their travel experience
Internal Reflections	Physical Structures and Natural Environments	"[...] we had plenty of beaches; it was always a very open environment. So, in that respect, it was very peaceful." (<i>Giovana, 35 years old, destination: Jamaica</i>)
Internal Reflections	Engagement	"[...] and on the cruise ship we were in a world of our own, you know? We had no contact with anything or anyone." (<i>Ana, 36 years old, destination: Portugal, Spain, and Cape Verde</i>) "[...] we spent the day sightseeing and exploring, and then, once we actually started the pilgrimage, we were completely disconnected from everything [...]" (<i>Fábia, 38 years old, destination: Spain</i>)
Internal Reflections	Relationships	"That was when we returned to Lisbon and were welcomed by a couple who were friends of one of our close friends back home. In other words, people who had never met us before, fellow Brazilians living in Portugal." (<i>Ana, 36 years old, destination: Portugal, Spain, and Cape Verde</i>) "This gentleman ended up taking us in his car and driving us all the way to Barcelos [...]" (<i>Fábia, 38 years old, destination: Spain</i>)

Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

The well-being promoters identified in this study are consistent with those described by Mayer et al. (2019). Even within a challenging travel context, some activities provided immersion, opportunities to develop positive relationships, and physical conditions that fostered positive feelings among participants (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023). Similar findings were reported by Huang et al. (2023), who demonstrated how emotional discomfort can be integrated into a eudaimonic experience of personal growth.

4.3 Disorienting dilemma and self-reflection through well-being reducers and promoters: the most memorable moments of travel

When asked about the most memorable moments of their trips, participants reported episodes marked by intense emotional experiences, both negative and positive. Narratives of tension included returning home, receiving news about the pandemic, witnessing passengers attempting to reschedule flights, and navigating crowded airports—experiences that were both visually and emotionally impactful (Zhang et al., 2023). Other accounts referred to the sadness of having to interrupt a trip (Mayer & Coelho, 2021), fear of infecting family members (Doğan et al., 2022),

uncertainty about the days ahead, and experiences of xenophobia and hostility (Tse & Tung, 2021). Empty, silent environments, which would normally be vibrant and lively, evoked feelings of strangeness and discomfort (Vărzaru et al., 2021). These elements intensified psychological discomfort and highlighted the pandemic's impact on tourism experiences (Table 6).

Table 6 – Codes from the TE-TLT and well-being dimensions: well-being reducers in the most memorable moments of the travel

TE-TLT Dimension Codes – Disorienting Dilemma and Self-Reflection	Well-Being Dimension Codes – Reducers of Well-Being	Excerpts Illustrating Negative Experiences from the Most Memorable Moments of the Trip
Adverse Issues	Stressful Environments	"[...] we arrived at the ferry terminal by bus without tickets, and it was completely packed—crowded, crowded—with everyone terrified." (<i>Sofia, 39 years old, destination: Apicum-Açu, Brazil</i>) "I think one of the moments that affected me the most was that I almost missed my flight because of all that confusion." (<i>Lorena, 25 years old, destination: United States</i>)
Adverse Issues and Internal Reflections	Expectation Violations	"What struck me the most was seeing places that were usually crowded completely empty [...]." (<i>Beatriz, 25 years old, destination: Matinhos, Brazil</i>) "[...] when we got there, the restaurant was empty. That really stood out to us [...]. There was this sense of emptiness everywhere." (<i>Cecília, 44 years old, destination: England, the Netherlands, and Portugal</i>)
Adverse Issues and Internal Reflections	Interpersonal Conflicts	"To be completely honest, I had never experienced that kind of prejudice before, you know? I had never been discriminated against like that. They shouted at us, insulted us, drove us away, treated us with hostility, and said that we were dirty, that we should go back to our country, that we were bringing disease to them [...]." (<i>Fábia, 38 years old, destination: Spain</i>)

Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

On the other hand, participants also recalled moments of accomplishment and connection, such as the excitement of visiting long-desired destinations (Seligman, 2011; Mayer et al., 2019) and the appreciation of spending time with family members, reinforcing eudaimonic aspects such as purpose, accomplishment, and meaningful relationships (Huang et al., 2023), as illustrated in Table 7.

Table 7 – Codes from the TE-TLT and well-being dimensions: well-being promoters in the most memorable moments of the trip

TE-TLT Dimension Codes – Self-Reflection	Well-Being Dimension Codes – Promoters of Well-Being	Excerpts Illustrating Positive Experiences from the Most Memorable Moments of the Trip
Internal Reflections	Accomplishment	"[...] the most memorable moment of the trip for me was visiting Paris and the Eiffel Tower, and all those iconic landmarks... Not only Paris, but also Rome [...], the Colosseum, Place de la Bastille, and the Louvre Museum." (<i>Ruan, 25 years old, destination: Portugal, Italy, France, and England</i>) "Arriving there was very memorable because it truly represented the fulfillment of a dream, despite everything that was happening at the time." (<i>Roberta, 38 years old, destination: France</i>)
Internal Reflections	Meaning and Purpose, and Relationships	"There were several moments when we were able to spend meaningful time together as a family, something we had not done in years." (<i>Regina, 42 years old, destination: Veranópolis, Brazil</i>) "Honestly, being with my mother during that moment was the most meaningful part of the trip for me [...]. It was incredibly important to be there with her." (<i>Marta, 44 years old, destination: Itamaracá, Brazil</i>)

Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

Emotional fluctuations reveal that well-being in the tourism experience is dynamic, marked by internal struggles, meaning-making processes, and personal growth (Mayer et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2023). This ambivalence points to the possibility of transformation emerging from crisis (Mezirow, 1991), with effects that extend beyond the travel experience itself.

4.4. Self-reflection, new actions, and new skills: learning and transformation among participants

When discussing the consequences of their experiences during their trips, participants reported impacts that extended beyond the tourism context, affecting emotional, social, financial, and health-related spheres (Nickerson et al., 2020; Kirillova et al., 2017a). Consistent with Transformative Learning Theory, the narratives revealed three main dimensions: Self-Reflection, New Actions, and Learning and Transformation (Mezirow, 1991; Wolf et al., 2017; Soullard et al., 2019).

These dimensions were coded as Internal Reflections, New Actions, and Learning and Transformation.

Examples are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8 – Codes and excerpts related to participants' learning and transformation

TE-TLT Dimensions	Excerpts Illustrating Participants' Reflections on Learning and Transformation
Internal Reflections	"[...] it was a very difficult moment, so much so that it was during that period that I started therapy [...]." (<i>Mateus, 24 years old, destination: Switzerland</i>) "I think I became more psychologically aware. I have difficulty leaving things for tomorrow. You know, I became more like that—more immediate in the way I approach things..." (<i>Fábia, 38 years old, destination: Spain</i>) "When I stop to think about that period, I realize that I place much greater value on spending time with my family..." (<i>Beatriz, 25 years old, destination: Matinhos, Brazil</i>) "Humanity has a great potential for doing harmful things. That became much clearer to me than anything else." (<i>Rodrigo, 29 years old, destination: São Paulo, Brazil</i>)
New Actions	"[...] it really changed the way I look at other people, you know? In helping others... [...] now I think about people first." (<i>Sofia, 39 years old, destination: Apicum-Açu, Brazil</i>) "Today I feel that I am able to learn and see things differently. I think I developed the habit of learning more about local culture and about the businesses that exist in the places I visit..." (<i>Valéria, 27 years old, destination: Argentina and Uruguay</i>) "I started renting Airbnbs (...) near beaches that were not too crowded..." (<i>Giovana, 35 years old, destination: Jamaica</i>)
Learning and Transformation	"So, I learned that we have to live for today [...]." (<i>Cecília, 44 years old, destination: England, the Netherlands, and Portugal</i>) "Patience. It is something I did not have and that I developed." (<i>Marta, 44 years old, destination: Itamaracá, Brazil</i>) "With the positive lessons I learned, I became more perseverant..." (<i>Rodrigo, 29 years old, destination: São Paulo, Brazil</i>) "I think I became more independent, you know?" (<i>Lorena, 25 years old, destination: United States</i>)

Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

Participants' reflections were associated with different dimensions of well-being. Self-reflective processes were often linked to factors that reduced well-being, such as expectation violations, interpersonal conflicts, and the physical and emotional fatigue experienced during the pandemic. Conversely, the changes perceived by participants were also associated with well-being promoters, particularly the dimensions of relationships, meaning, purpose, and accomplishment, evidenced by a greater appreciation of family, strengthened empathy, the search for new meanings in life, and the development of personal characteristics such as patience, perseverance, and independence.

Beyond these subjective impacts, participants reported practical changes, including increased attention to health, the adoption of financial precautions, and the establishment of new criteria for future travel. These behavioral transformations, discussed by Sheldon (2020), Mayer and Coelho (2021), and Dryhurst et al. (2020), demonstrate how learning was translated into concrete actions, reinforcing the transformative nature of the travel experience.

According to the participants' accounts, the psychological consequences included lessons related to gratitude, appreciation, and awareness of how to live better (Sheldon, 2020; Tikhonova et al., 2018); the financial consequences involved greater caution regarding contracts and purchases (Sheldon, 2020; Mayer & Coelho, 2021); the social consequences included new forms of communication, coping with fear, and a broader understanding of global issues (Doğan et al., 2022); and the health-related consequences reflected a greater appreciation of life and family, as well as increased attention to preventive care (Orden-Mejía et al., 2022; Dryhurst et al., 2020).

Thus, the disorienting dilemma, understood as the initial trigger of the process experienced by participants, was followed by processes of self-reflection and meaning-making, which manifested as changes in attitudes, beliefs, priorities, and behaviors, consistent with the assumptions of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991). Although situated within an extreme context, these experiences reveal the transformative potential of travel, particularly when shaped by challenges that directly affect individuals' sense of control, security, and predictability.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The findings of this study indicate that tourism experiences lived in crisis contexts mobilize complex processes of learning, well-being, and personal change. Based on the analysis of the interviews, it is possible to understand how tourists who traveled between January and March 2020—a critical period in the spread of COVID-19—experienced their journeys by articulating the dimensions of Tourism Experiences through the lens of Transformative Learning

Theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991; Wolf et al., 2017) and the dimensions of well-being reducers and promoters (Mayer et al., 2019).

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and the PERMA model emerged in participants' narratives, contributing to an understanding of fluctuations in well-being experienced during and after travel. The findings suggest that the experiences analyzed can be interpreted in light of the stages proposed by Wolf et al. (2017), based on Mezirow (1991). The data reveal the experience of disorienting dilemmas, processes of self-reflection, the adoption of new actions, and the development of new skills. This trajectory was marked by intense emotional fluctuations and by experiences that affected participants' perceptions of well-being. Consequently, it becomes possible to articulate the relationship among Transformative Learning Theory, the notion of Transformative Tourism Experience, and the dynamics of well-being, highlighting how these elements interrelate within transformative processes.

Considering that transformative processes tend to be emotionally intense (Kirillova et al., 2017a), and that the emotions and feelings experienced throughout a trip are directly related to fluctuations in subjective well-being, the notion of Transformative Tourism Experience provides a broader understanding of how meaningful moments are experienced, interpreted, and incorporated into individuals' lives, generating profound insights (Filep, 2012).

The empirical findings allow Transformative Tourism Experiences to be conceptualized as processes in which initial disorientation, fluctuations in well-being, and self-reflection become intertwined. Participants' narratives demonstrate that experiences lived in crisis contexts and marked by real fear, loss of control, and disrupted expectations create a state of disorientation that directly affects hedonic well-being while simultaneously opening space for deeper reflections on values, purpose, priorities, and ways of living—characteristics associated with the pursuit of eudaimonic well-being. This interpretation is consistent with Transformative Learning Theory, which has long recognized emotional discomfort, risk, and loss as inherent elements of transformative processes (Mezirow, 1991; Poutiatine, 2009; Green, 2023), although it has not systematically addressed fluctuations in hedonic and eudaimonic well-being throughout such processes.

These findings also converge with recent studies suggesting that disorientation alone may not be sufficient to produce transformation. Consistent with Zhao (2025), the data indicate that challenging experiences acquire transformative potential when accompanied by processes of reflection and meaning-making. According to Zhao (2025), disorientation alone is insufficient to generate transformation; rather, transformation depends on reflective processes, and the meaning attributed to the experience is central. In other words, not every tourism experience is transformative (Amaro et al., 2025). Intense experiences do not necessarily lead to transformation if they fail to trigger tourists' interpretive processes. In the absence of such interpretive processes, disorientation may play a negative role, compromising the perceived meaning of the experience and thereby inhibiting or limiting its transformative outcomes.

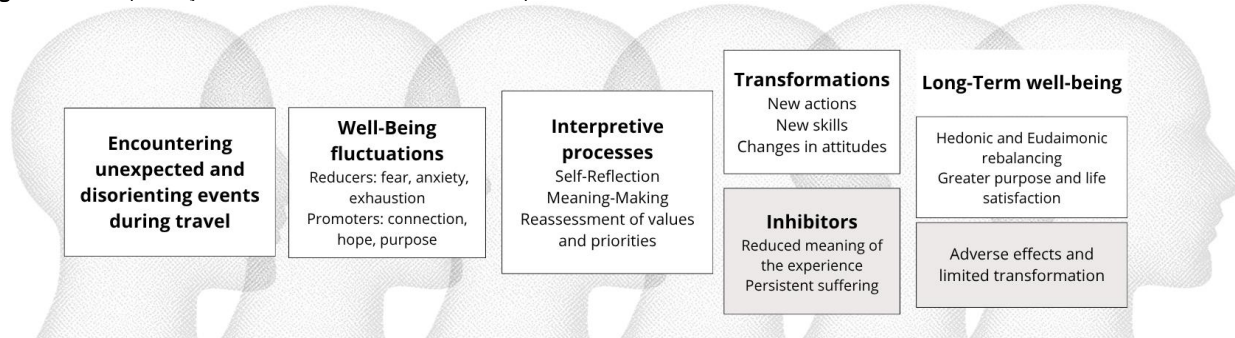
In the context of the present study, which is more extreme than those examined in previous research (Kirillova et al., 2017a; Kirillova et al., 2017b; Richardson & Insch, 2021; Soulard et al., 2021; Pala & Cetin, 2022; Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2022; Kunwar & Ulak, 2024; Milazzo & Soulard, 2024; Amaro et al., 2025; Zhao, 2025), meaning emerged as an existential process associated with survival, appreciation of life, and the redefinition of priorities. Thus, the transformation observed among participants did not stem solely from the intensity of the experience or from the negative emotions they felt, but from their ability to interpret it, attribute meaning to it, and integrate it into their life trajectories.

As an outcome of this reflective process, participants reported adopting new actions both during travel and in their everyday lives, including greater self-care practices, increased appreciation of interpersonal relationships, greater flexibility in travel planning, and new ways of dealing with uncertainty. These actions contributed to the rebalancing of well-being across dimensions associated with both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects. Participants' accounts also revealed the development of skills such as resilience, adaptability, critical reflection, empathy, and self-care, which were perceived as important lessons derived from the lived experience. From a well-being perspective, strengthening these skills may positively influence physical and mental well-being, promoting greater life satisfaction, a stronger sense of accomplishment, and an enhanced sense of purpose and meaning.

Figure 2 presents the Conceptual Synthesis of the Transformative Tourism Experience in Crisis Contexts, developed from the empirical findings and the dialogue between Transformative Learning Theory and the PERMA model. The figure illustrates how confronting unexpected and disorienting events, combined with fluctuations in subjective well-being, creates an experiential field in which interpretive processes—such as self-reflection, meaning-making, and the reassessment of values and priorities—play a central role. From these processes, different outcomes may emerge, including personal transformations manifested in new actions, skills, and attitudinal changes, as well as

limited or inhibited trajectories characterized by diminished meaning or the persistence of suffering. The figure also highlights that such processes may yield different long-term well-being outcomes, reinforcing the understanding of the Transformative Tourism Experience as a complex, non-linear process contingent on context.

Figure 2 - Conceptual synthesis of transformative tourism experiences in crisis contexts



Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

Well-being fluctuations are constitutive elements of the transformative experience. As Huang et al. (2023) argue, discomfort may catalyze flourishing when accompanied by reflection, processing, and reconnection with personal values, all of which are central elements of Transformative Learning Theory. TLT promotes profound changes in values, attitudes, and skills (Wolf et al., 2017), while the PERMA model, by integrating hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, helps explain how such transformations may foster accomplishment, engagement, meaning, and purpose (Seligman, 2018; Mayer et al., 2019; Filep, 2012; Huang et al., 2023).

This combination allows tourism to be understood as a privileged space for personal growth, particularly in challenging contexts (Laing & Frost, 2017). This interaction suggests that challenges experienced during travel can foster deep reflection, skill development, and the re-evaluation of personal values. Understanding this relationship is essential for tourism researchers and practitioners, as it highlights the sector's potential as a vehicle for human development and the promotion of well-being.

Although not every trip is transformative (Morgan, 2010; Coelho et al., 2025), those undertaken during the pandemic stand out for their potential to generate change given their extreme circumstances (Abdullah et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2022). These tourism experiences were marked by disorienting triggers, intense emotional responses, profound self-reflection, and significant transformations.

Transformative tourism experiences can therefore be defined as those that originate from encounters with unexpected or disorienting events that generate fluctuations in subjective well-being, alternately eliciting positive and negative emotions, while challenging individuals' assumptions and values. Such events foster deep reflection, create opportunities for personal growth and the development of new skills, and simultaneously require individuals to develop strategies for coping with the discomforts and challenges experienced during travel. Well-being, therefore, is not merely an outcome but also an active and processual component of the transformative tourism experience.

However, it is important to recognize that not every negative event inevitably leads to positive transformation, as some may result in adverse psychological impacts and profound trauma. While some individuals are able to reinterpret their experiences and derive growth from them, others face greater difficulties depending on personal, social, and contextual factors (Mayer & Coelho, 2021). For this reason, psychological support and the presence of social support networks become essential in the post-travel period.

Transformative Learning Theory also expands well-being research by proposing a deeper interpretation of well-being reducers. While many studies prioritize well-being promoters and the minimization of negative experiences (Mayer et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2023; Pung & Chiappa, 2020), TLT highlights discomfort as a starting point for transformation. In this sense, feelings of estrangement and disruption become relevant for meaning-making and personal maturation (Mezirow, 1991; Wolf et al., 2017). Recognizing well-being reducers as structuring elements of transformation is essential for understanding tourism experiences in their full complexity.

Similarly, Soulard, McGehee, and Knollenberg (2020) found that disorientation may emerge at different moments throughout the journey, including after travelers return home, characterizing transformation as a continuous and non-linear process.

The conceptual synthesis of the transformative tourism experience proposed in this study incorporates these perspectives by articulating the cognitive processes of TLT with the affective and contextual dimensions of well-being. Accordingly, the disorienting dilemma is understood as the conceptual trigger (Amaro et al., 2025), while its transformative effects vary according to the presence of well-being promoters and reducers (Mayer et al., 2019), which shape the intensity and direction of perceived changes by fostering self-reflection and meaning-making processes (Zhao, 2025). Thus, the transformative potential of an experience lies in how tourists interpret unexpected events rather than solely in the social or environmental triggers themselves (Amaro et al., 2025).

Although empirically grounded in experiences lived during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Conceptual Synthesis of Transformative Tourism Experiences contributes to understanding transformative processes in broader crisis contexts, where unexpected and disruptive events challenge previously established assumptions, values, and meanings. Therefore, without claiming direct generalizability, we argue that this conceptual synthesis offers analytical potential for future investigations into transformative experiences in extreme situations, such as natural disasters, armed conflicts, or other global crises that profoundly affect tourism.

In this way, the proposed conceptual synthesis integrates different temporalities and forms of disorientation, recognizing that tourism experiences may unfold through successive waves of discomfort, reflection, and emotional re-balancing, consistent with the findings of Zhao (2025), Amaro et al. (2025), and Soulard et al. (2020).

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article offers an innovative theoretical contribution by proposing the integration of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) and the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), applying this articulation to the field of tourism. The combination of the theory and the model contributes to studies of Transformative Learning by considering fluctuations in well-being and demonstrating that transformation emerges from non-linear dynamics between positive and adverse experiences rather than from continuous states of balance or satisfaction. Simultaneously, it contributes to studies of well-being in tourism by extending a perspective traditionally centered on the positive aspects of travel experiences.

Furthermore, the study offers an additional relevant theoretical contribution through its application in the context of a global crisis. In a global scenario marked by political instability, armed conflicts, climate change, and the recurrence of natural disasters (Hu & Wang, 2025; Grigoriadis et al., 2025; Gössling & Scott, 2025; Rosselló et al., 2020), tourism experiences are increasingly shaped by uncertainty, perceived risk, and adverse situations. These elements, which are becoming ever more present in travel experiences, have significant potential to influence not only how tourism is organized but also how travelers attribute meaning to their experiences. In this regard, the study supports recent findings (Zhao, 2025; Amaro et al., 2025), which indicate that challenging experiences acquire transformative potential when accompanied by processes of reflection and meaning-making, with the meaning attributed to the experience serving as a central element of transformative learning.

Well-being fluctuations may foster transformation, but intense challenges can also lead to emotional difficulties and trauma. It is therefore essential that public and private tourism managers understand the implications of crises and disasters that place travelers in unexpected and extreme situations. In other words, it is crucial to consider both well-being reducers—such as internal conflicts, fatigue, stressful environments, and interpersonal conflicts—and well-being promoters, including accomplishment, meaning, contact with natural environments, physical structures, positive relationships, and engagement (Mayer et al., 2019; Pung & Chiappa, 2020; Kirillova et al., 2016; 2017b), in order to create conditions that facilitate reflection, meaning-making, and care for well-being in unexpected situations.

The findings of this study demonstrate that tourism management, particularly in contexts marked by instability and crisis, requires specific capabilities to deal with loss, uncertainty, and perceptions of risk (Dryhurst et al., 2020), as well as with emerging demands in the post-COVID-19 context (Mulcahy et al., 2023). Such capabilities include implementing clear communication and customer service policies (Mayer & Coelho, 2021), investing in customer interaction management (Coelho & Mayer, 2020), and planning responses to crisis situations (Rocha & Silveira, 2020).

These managerial competencies create opportunities for practical applications within the tourism sector. For example, designing safe and welcoming environments that encourage meaningful connections and, above all, personal reflection may increase the transformative potential of tourism experiences (Huang et al., 2023; Milazzo & Soulard,

2024). This is particularly relevant, given that individuals' well-being increases when at least one well-being promoter is present and reaches even higher levels when multiple promoters are experienced simultaneously during travel (Mayer et al., 2019).

Extreme situations, such as those experienced during the pandemic, may stimulate processes of personal transformation. However, it is important to avoid romanticizing crises. Adverse events impose significant emotional, physical, and social risks (Kirillova et al., 2017b), and tourism managers should not seek to create situations of vulnerability. Rather, they should recognize the possibility that well-being reducers may emerge and act to ensure that experiences occur in a safe, planned, and controlled manner. In this context, the managerial challenge requires both creativity and responsibility to balance meaningful challenges with well-being-promoting elements without exposing travelers to unnecessary risks. For instance, developing crisis management protocols to guide employees and tourists in unlikely but foreseeable situations should become standard practice among destination management organizations and tourism facility managers. Such protocols should address negative situations including moral and sexual harassment, theft and other crimes, problems related to electricity, water, and internet services, loss of documents, tourist health issues, and service failures, among others. Internal staff training should also be considered (Neuhofer, 2025) to improve tourism management, foster innovation, and increase the likelihood of generating genuine transformations. Strengthening elements of destination authenticity may also encourage tourists' self-reflection, as travelers often compare their own realities with those they encounter at the destination.

It is therefore necessary to promote a balance between transformation and safety by designing experiences that encourage reflection and personal growth in an ethical, structured, and sustainable manner. Creating experiences that foster tourists' well-being and development benefits not only travelers themselves but also host destinations, residents, and local entrepreneurs. In addition, strengthening support networks and mitigating the impacts of crises through physical and psychological support are urgent priorities (Schweiggart et al., 2025).

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged. The methodological choices were guided by a post-positivist paradigm and a deductive approach, drawing on pre-existing theoretical categories from the scientific literature, particularly those associated with Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and the PERMA model. However, the subjective and experiential nature of the phenomenon under investigation allows for multiple interpretations and meanings. Thus, it is recognized that a constructionist approach could broaden the understanding of the interpretive dimension of participants' narratives and the symbolic interactions between individuals and the travel context. Future studies may further explore this perspective, particularly through methods such as Grounded Theory, which emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between participants and researchers.

Moreover, although the qualitative approach enabled relevant theoretical advances, it was not possible to measure the precise impact of the experiences reported, nor to determine which elements exerted greater or lesser influence on transformative processes. Likewise, the study did not assess the frequency of identified codes or the continuity of changes in subsequent travel experiences. Future research may further develop the conceptual synthesis proposed here through quantitative methodologies, particularly by developing and testing scales designed to measure transformative tourism experiences.

Nevertheless, this investigation represents an original and significant contribution. The analysis of 17 interviews provided valuable insights and advanced the theoretical debate by integrating transformative tourism and subjective well-being. The proposed articulation between Transformative Learning Theory and the PERMA model introduces a new interpretive pathway within tourism studies by demonstrating that the traveler's journey can simultaneously constitute a physical displacement and a process of self-discovery, self-reflection, personal growth, and transformation.

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Data availability statement

The data are not available due to ethical restrictions regarding the protection of the identity, privacy, and confidentiality of research participants, as stipulated in the Informed Consent Form (ICF).

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