

TRANSFORMATIVE TOURISM: INTERNATIONAL LESSONS AND STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The global tourism industry is undergoing a structural shift from experience-based consumption toward transformation-oriented travel, where value is derived from lasting personal change rather than temporary satisfaction. Positioned at the intersection of transformative learning theory, positive psychology, and the emerging transformation economy, transformative tourism emphasizes deep engagement with self, culture, and nature as a catalyst for enduring psychological and behavioral change. This study aims to clarify the theoretical foundations of transformative tourism, examine how transformative mechanisms are operationalized across international case studies, and propose a strategic framework for Vietnam. A qualitative multi-method approach is employed, combining literature review and comparative case analysis of six destinations: Bhutan, Bali, Peru, Iceland, Japan, and Costa Rica. The findings identify four recurring dimensions that enable transformation: structured challenge, guided meaning-making, mindful disconnection, and regenerative engagement. These dimensions are then translated into a four-pillar strategic framework tailored to Vietnam, including depth-oriented experiential design, culturally embedded facilitation, mindful environment planning, and regenerative community participation. The study contributes to the literature by synthesizing fragmented concepts into an integrated framework and offers practical implications for policy and destination management. However, the proposed model remains conceptual and requires further empirical validation.

Keywords: Transformative tourism, transformation economy, international lessons, strategic directions.

1. BACKGROUND

For decades, global tourism has operated within the paradigm of the experience economy [1], where value is created through staged experiences designed to entertain and engage consumers. However, recent socio-cultural and environmental shifts, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate concerns, and the psychological pressures of digital life—have significantly altered traveler expectations. Increasingly, tourists seek not only enjoyment but also meaning, personal growth, and purpose.

This shift reflects a broader transition toward the transformation economy, in which individuals pursue experiences that lead to lasting changes in identity, values, and behavior [1]. Within this context, transformative tourism has emerged as a distinct approach to travel. It refers to tourism experiences that facilitate meaningful and enduring change through deep engagement with cultural, natural, or existential dimensions [2].

It is important to distinguish transformative tourism from related concepts. While wellness tourism focuses on physical and mental health, regenerative tourism emphasizes

environmental restoration, and slow tourism prioritizes pace and immersion, transformative tourism specifically targets internal psychological and identity-level change. This distinction remains underdeveloped in existing literature and contributes to conceptual ambiguity.

Current research focuses on how travel acts as a catalyst for lasting personal change, moving beyond temporary satisfaction toward eudaimonic well-being. Foundational works have established the conceptual boundaries of the field [3], while others explored the "transformative journey" through the lens of transformative learning theory [4]. Recent studies, such as the systematic review by Pung et al. [5] emphasize the role of "liminality" and "disorienting dilemmas" in triggering identity shifts. Additionally, Wolf et al. [6] have investigated the intersection of volunteer tourism and social transformation. Despite this growth, there remains a significant gap in empirical frameworks that translate these theoretical psychological mechanisms into practical development strategies for emerging destinations like Vietnam.

2. RESEARCH PURPOSE

This study addresses the following research questions:

What theoretical mechanisms enable transformative outcomes in tourism?

How are these mechanisms operationalized across international case studies?

How can these insights be translated into a strategic framework for Vietnam?

Accordingly, the objectives are:

To synthesize theoretical foundations of transformative tourism

To analyze international models through a comparative lens

To propose a context-specific strategic framework for Vietnam

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative multi-method approach combining literature review and comparative case study analysis.

3.1. Literature review

Academic articles, books, and industry reports published primarily between 2010–2025 were selected from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Sources were selected based on their relevance to transformative tourism or related fields and their conceptual or empirical contribution. The review focused on identifying key definitions, theoretical frameworks, and mechanisms of transformation that informed the subsequent comparative analysis.

3.2. Case study selection and analysis

Six destinations (Bhutan, Bali, Peru, Iceland, Japan, and Costa Rica) were purposively selected based on three criteria: the presence of well-documented transformative, wellness, regenerative, or purpose-driven tourism practices; the existence of structured or institutionalized models; and diversity of cultural and environmental contexts. A cross-case comparative method was applied using four analytical dimensions: (i) transformation mechanisms, (ii) implementation strategies, (iii) supporting evidence, and (iv) limitations. This approach enables the identification of recurring patterns and the development of a conceptual framework applicable to Vietnam.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Theoretical foundations

4.1.1. *Transformative tourism*

The conceptual transition from the "Experience economy" [1] to the "Transformation economy" represents a shift in the value proposition of tourism. While experiences are staged for the guest, transformations are staged with the guest [1]. In this paradigm, the traveler is not a passive consumer but an "aspirant" seeking a structural change in the self. Central to the Transformation economy is the role of the "guide" or "coach", who facilitates reflection, contextualization, and meaning-making throughout the experience. Unlike traditional service providers who deliver predefined outputs, transformation facilitators support participants in interpreting their experiences and integrating insights into their post-experience lives. Pine and Gilmore emphasize that without intentional guidance and reflective structures, experiences risk remaining episodic and recreational rather than transformative.

Transformative tourism draws conceptually from Transformative learning theory proposed by Mezirow [7] and Positive psychology proposed by Seligman [8]. While Mezirow explains how critical reflection transforms individuals' frames of reference, Seligman's PERMA model explains how positive experiences contribute to long-term well-being and flourishing.

Building on this foundation, Lean [4] and Kirillova et al. [2] argue that Transformative tourism is a form of travel that intentionally facilitates such personal change through immersive, emotionally salient, and often challenging experiences. Ross [9] further suggests that transformation requires conditions that encourage reflection, vulnerability, and self-discovery.

More recent scholars define Transformative tourism as a process in which travelers undergo meaningful and lasting change in perspective, identity, or lifestyle through deep engagement with cultural, natural, or spiritual contexts [3].

Generally, Transformative tourism is a profound travel experience that facilitates a significant and enduring shift in an individual's worldview, values, and identity. Unlike traditional leisure travel, this paradigm is rooted in transformative learning theory and positive psychology, viewing travel as a catalyst for personal evolution.

4.1.2. *Psychological and learning mechanisms of transformation*

Transformative tourism is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework combining Transformative learning theory [7], Positive psychology [8], and Self-determination theory [10].

4.1.2.1. Transformative learning theory

The theoretical architecture of transformative tourism is fundamentally anchored in Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory - TLT [7]. Unlike traditional learning which focuses on the accumulation of new information, TLT describes an epistemological shift—a structural reorganization of how an individual perceives, understands, and interprets their world.

In tourism, this dilemma is catalyzed by cognitive dissonance [11] occurring when travelers confront unfamiliar cultural norms or environmental extremes. The process follows four critical stages:

Triggering: The encounter with the disorienting dilemma.

Critical reflection: Questioning the premises of one's own beliefs [7].

Rational dialogue: Engaging with "the Other" to validate new perspectives [3].

Reintegration: Permanently incorporating the revised worldview into one's post-trip lifestyle.

By synthesizing these frameworks, it becomes evident that transformative tourism is a high-level pedagogical tool. It moves the traveler from a state of "knowing about the world" to a state of "rethinking their place within it."

4.1.2.2. Positive psychology & Self-determination theory

Transformative tourism intersects deeply with the field of Positive psychology, a discipline that shifts the focus from soul-healing to "soul-flourishing." The synergy between travel and personal growth is best explained through the operationalization of Seligman's PERMA framework [8] and Ryan and Deci's Self Determination Theory – SDT [10].

Positive psychology and the PERMA framework:

At the heart of Positive psychology lies the PERMA model, which defines five essential elements for human flourishing. In Transformative tourism, travel acts as a catalyst that activates these elements more intensely than in daily life:

Positive emotion (P): Beyond simple pleasure, Transformative travel evokes "eudaimonic" emotions such as awe and gratitude when encountering profound cultural or natural contexts.

Engagement (E): Individuals achieve a state of "Flow" [12] by participating in challenging, immersive activities that demand total concentration.

Relationships (R): Deep engagement with host communities fosters meaningful social connections, which are vital for expanding one's identity and sense of belonging.

Meaning (M): Transformative journeys provide a sense of purpose, allowing travelers to connect their experiences to something larger than themselves, such as spiritual heritage or global conservation.

Accomplishment (A): Successfully navigating the "challenging experiences" inherent in transformative travel builds self-efficacy and a sense of mastery.

Intrinsic motivation: Self-determination theory (SDT):

While PERMA defines the components of flourishing, Self-determination theory (SDT) explains the inner motivational drivers that make transformation possible. Travel serves as a "liminal space" [13] that provides the ideal conditions to satisfy three innate psychological needs:

Autonomy: The freedom of the "liminal space" allows travelers to shed social masks and act according to their true selves.

Competence: Overcoming the "disorienting dilemmas" [7] of a trip reinforces the traveler's belief in their ability to adapt and grow.

Relatedness: The "vulnerability and self-discovery" identified by Ross [9] create deep, authentic bonds with the destination's natural and spiritual essence.

By integrating Positive psychology (PERMA) with motivational theory (SDT), it can be concluded that transformative tourism facilitates an enduring shift in wellbeing. It moves the traveler beyond temporary relaxation (hedonia) toward a permanent state of psychological resilience and self-actualization (eudaimonia). This structured flourishing is what ensures the "meaningful and lasting change" in lifestyle and perspective post-journey [3].

These processes ultimately contribute to eudaimonic well-being, which refers to long-term psychological flourishing characterized by meaning, self-realization, and personal growth, rather than short-term pleasure [14]. This distinguishes transformative tourism from conventional tourism forms that primarily generate hedonic satisfaction.

Eudaimonic well-being is commonly associated with meaning in life, personal growth, autonomy, purpose, and self-actualization [15]. Unlike hedonic pleasure, eudaimonic outcomes are enduring and reflect deep changes in identity, values, and life orientation.

Transformative tourism aligns closely with the eudaimonic paradigm. Rather than prioritizing relaxation or entertainment, transformative travel intentionally incorporates challenge, reflection, and liminality, encouraging travelers to question assumptions and reconstruct meaning [2], [4]. Empirical studies show that such experiences foster lasting outcomes such as enhanced self-awareness, psychological resilience, and a renewed sense of purpose [3].

Thus, eudaimonic well-being represents a key outcome of transformative tourism, explaining how travel can move individuals beyond temporary pleasure toward sustained flourishing and identity-level transformation.

4.1.3. Risks and limitations of transformative tourism

While the potential for personal growth is significant, scholars argue that transformative tourism is not a guaranteed outcome and carries inherent risks. A primary concern is the psychological risk associated with "disorienting dilemmas." If the transformative process—which often involves questioning one's core identity—is not supported by a structured environment or professional facilitation, it can lead to emotional distress rather than positive change [4], [5].

Furthermore, the commodification of transformation presents an ethical dilemma. As transformation becomes a marketed commodity, there is a danger of "staged authenticity," where profound experiences are reduced to superficial, commercialized products [16]-[18]. Additionally, the concept faces socio-economic limitations; transformative travel often requires significant time and financial investment, potentially creating an elitist paradigm that excludes broader demographics [19]. Finally, critics point to the risk of cultural appropriation, where local spiritual or indigenous practices are utilized as tools for tourist self-actualization without regard for the host community's cultural integrity [20], [21].

4.2. International case study analysis

To examine how transformative tourism operates across different contexts, this study focuses on six international destinations: Bhutan, Bali, Peru, Iceland, Japan, and Costa Rica. Following the case selection criteria outlined in Section 3.2, these destinations were selected for their well-documented transformative, wellness, regenerative, or purpose-driven tourism practices, their structured or institutionalized models, and their diversity of cultural and environmental contexts. Together, the cases provide a comparative basis for identifying recurring mechanisms of transformation while accounting for context-specific approaches.

4.2.1. Bhutan - Gross national happiness as a transformative framework

4.2.1.1. Mechanism

Bhutan's transformative tourism model is grounded in the Gross National Happiness (GNH) paradigm, which prioritizes wellbeing, cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development over economic growth [22]. Transformation is operationalized through a policy-driven and value-based system that deliberately limits mass tourism while fostering deep cultural and spiritual engagement.

A key mechanism is the high-value, low-impact tourism policy, implemented through strict visitor regulation and the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF). The SDF (USD 100 per

person per night as of 2025) functions not only as an economic tool but also as a behavioral filter, attracting visitors who are more likely to seek meaningful and reflective experiences.

In addition, transformation is facilitated through structured cultural immersion, including interactions with monastic communities, meditation practices, and Buddhist teachings. Guided experiences led by trained local facilitators create conditions for critical reflection, cognitive dissonance, and meaning making, aligning with transformative learning theory [7].

Finally, Bhutan's broader socio-ecological context—including its carbon-negative status and strong environmental policies—reinforces a holistic environment of simplicity and mindfulness, enabling visitors to experience psychological recalibration and value reorientation.

4.2.1.2. Strengths

Bhutan demonstrates a high level of policy coherence, where national development philosophy, tourism strategy, and cultural values are fully aligned. The integration of the GNH framework into tourism ensures that transformation is not incidental but systemically embedded.

The model also shows strong institutional effectiveness, as evidenced by its ability to maintain low visitor numbers while generating substantial revenue. The SDF mechanism successfully balances exclusivity and sustainability, allowing tourism to contribute directly to education, healthcare, and conservation.

Moreover, Bhutan offers a high degree of authenticity and cultural integrity, as tourism experiences are deeply rooted in living spiritual traditions rather than staged performances. This enhances the depth and credibility of transformative experiences.

4.2.1.3. Limitations

Despite its strengths, Bhutan's model faces several limitations. First, the high-cost structure limits accessibility, making the model difficult to replicate in developing countries that rely on higher visitor volumes.

Second, the model is heavily dependent on strong state control and governance capacity, which may not be transferable to contexts with weaker institutional frameworks.

Third, while the emphasis on cultural preservation is a strength, it may also lead to selective representation or controlled exposure of culture, potentially limiting diversity of experiences.

Finally, the model prioritizes depth over scale, raising questions about its scalability and broader economic impact, particularly in contexts where tourism is expected to generate mass employment.

4.2.2. *Bali, Indonesia - Spiritual retreats and conscious living*

4.2.2.1. Mechanism

Bali's transformative tourism model is rooted in its Hindu-Balinese cosmology and community-based spirituality, where transformation is facilitated through ritualized, embodied, and guided experiences rather than passive consumption.

A central mechanism lies in the use of spiritual and cultural practices as “disorienting dilemmas”, which challenge visitors' habitual lifestyles and cognitive frameworks. Rituals such as Melukat purification at Tirta Empul function as embodied experiences that combine physical immersion with emotional and symbolic cleansing, enabling psychological reset and introspection. Similarly, the annual Nyepi (Day of Silence) creates a form of enforced mindful disconnection, eliminating digital and sensory stimuli and generating a liminal space for reflection and value reorientation.

Another key mechanism is the presence of a structured “ecosystem of facilitators”, including yoga instructors, traditional healers (Balian), therapists, and spiritual practitioners. These actors play a role analogous to “transformation guides,” supporting visitors through processes of meditation, self-inquiry, and meaning making. Through guided practices in hubs such as Ubud, visitors are encouraged to engage in reflective dialogue and introspection, translating emotional experiences into lasting changes in identity, lifestyle, and wellbeing.

Together, these elements create a system in which transformation is achieved through the interaction between ritual practice, guided facilitation, and intentional disconnection, aligning with key principles of transformative learning [7].

4.2.2.2. Strengths

Bali demonstrates a highly developed facilitation ecosystem, where transformation is actively guided rather than left to chance. The presence of trained practitioners enhances the depth, structure, and consistency of transformative experiences.

The model also benefits from strong cultural embeddedness, as spiritual practices are not artificially constructed for tourism but originate from living religious and community traditions. This provides a sense of authenticity and experiential richness.

In addition, Bali has successfully integrated transformation into a high-value tourism economy, with wellness and spiritual tourism contributing significantly to national revenue. This indicates the model’s economic viability alongside its experiential value.

Finally, empirical studies suggest that Bali’s model effectively generates eudaimonic well-being outcomes, including increased self-awareness, resilience, and sense of purpose among participants.

4.2.2.3. Limitations

Despite its strengths, Bali’s model faces challenges related to over-commercialization and commodification of spirituality. The rapid growth of wellness tourism has led to the proliferation of standardized retreats, which may dilute authenticity and reduce the depth of transformative experiences.

Second, the quality of transformation is highly dependent on the competence and ethics of facilitators, which vary significantly across providers. The lack of standardized certification systems may result in inconsistent outcomes.

Third, Bali is increasingly affected by overcrowding, environmental degradation, and tourism pressure, particularly in key hubs such as Ubud. These conditions may undermine the very principles of mindfulness and reflection that the model seeks to promote.

Finally, while the model is culturally rich, it may not be fully transferable to other contexts without similar spiritual infrastructure and community integration, limiting its direct applicability elsewhere.

4.2.3. *Peru – Ancestral healing and shamanic transformation*

4.2.3.1. Mechanism

Peru’s transformative tourism model is grounded in indigenous cosmology and embodied cultural practices, where transformation is facilitated through deep engagement with ancestral knowledge systems.

A primary mechanism is the use of ritualized spiritual experiences, particularly shamanic ceremonies and Andean cosmological practices centered on Pachamama (Mother Earth). These encounters function as disorienting dilemmas, challenging Western epistemologies and enabling shifts toward relational and ecological worldviews.

Transformation is further reinforced through physical and environmental challenge, particularly high-altitude trekking (e.g., Inca Trail to Machu Picchu at 2,400–4,200 meters) and immersion in the Amazon rainforest. These conditions induce vulnerability, introspection, and heightened awareness, aligning with transformative learning processes.

In addition, Peru reflects a broader trend of “decolonizing wellness”, where indigenous knowledge is positioned as a legitimate framework for personal transformation. Structured interactions with Quechua communities enable participatory learning and intercultural dialogue, supporting meaning-making and identity reflection.

4.2.3.2. Strengths

Peru offers a high level of experiential intensity, combining physical challenge, cultural immersion, and spiritual engagement, which enhances the depth of transformative outcomes.

The model is also supported by growing market demand. According to PromPeru (2023), adventure and wellness tourists represent a high-value segment, with average daily spending exceeding USD 200 per visitor, significantly higher than mass tourism segments.

Furthermore, Peru provides a strong example of cultural preservation through tourism, where indigenous practices are not only maintained but also gain global recognition and economic value.

4.2.3.3. Limitations

A key limitation lies in the ethical risks of commodifying indigenous spirituality, particularly in the commercialization of shamanic rituals for tourists. This raises concerns regarding authenticity, cultural appropriation, and unequal benefit distribution.

Second, the model lacks standardized governance and quality control, resulting in variability in experience quality and potential exploitation.

Third, the reliance on physically demanding activities limits accessibility and may exclude broader tourist segments.

Finally, while transformative at the individual level, the model’s scalability and long-term sustainability remain uncertain, particularly in fragile ecological and cultural contexts.

4.2.4. *Iceland – Nature-driven transformation through extremes*

4.2.4.1. Mechanism

Iceland’s model is based on nature-induced transformation, where extreme environmental conditions function as catalysts for psychological and existential reflection.

The primary mechanism lies in exposure to raw and elemental landscapes—glaciers, volcanoes, geothermal fields—which generate feelings of awe, humility, and insignificance. These experiences act as disorienting dilemmas, prompting reevaluation of personal identity and human–nature relationships.

Transformation is further facilitated through high-intensity physical engagement, including glacier hiking, ice cave exploration, and cold-water immersion. These activities create conditions of controlled risk and challenge, fostering resilience and self-efficacy.

In addition, Iceland promotes slow and mindful travel practices, encouraging prolonged interaction with nature and reduced digital engagement, thereby supporting reflection and mental clarity.

4.2.4.2. Strengths

Iceland benefits from unique and non-replicable natural assets, which provide strong differentiation in the global tourism market.

The model aligns well with global sustainability trends, as demand for nature-based and low-impact tourism continues to grow. According to the Icelandic Tourist Board [23], Iceland's natural environment remains one of the primary motivations for international visitors.

Furthermore, the model effectively generates psychological outcomes, particularly in terms of awe, environmental awareness, and emotional resilience.

4.2.4.3. Limitations

The model is highly dependent on natural conditions and seasonality, limiting year-round accessibility and experience consistency.

Second, Iceland faces increasing challenges related to overtourism and environmental pressure, particularly in fragile ecosystems such as glaciers and volcanic areas.

Third, the model lacks strong cultural or facilitation components, which may limit depth of meaning-making compared to spiritually guided destinations.

Finally, its reliance on natural extremity makes it difficult to replicate in destinations without similar environmental characteristics.

4.2.5. Japan – Cultural discipline and mindful rituals

4.2.5.1. Mechanism

Japan's transformative tourism model is grounded in everyday cultural practices and disciplined mindfulness, where transformation emerges through repetition, simplicity, and presence.

Key mechanisms include Zen meditation, forest bathing (*shinrin-yoku*), tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), and aesthetic philosophies such as *wabi-sabi*. These practices function as structured forms of attention training and emotional regulation, guiding individuals toward introspection and self-awareness.

Unlike high-intensity models, Japan emphasizes low-intensity, high-depth experiences, where transformation occurs gradually through sustained engagement rather than dramatic disruption.

Scientific validation further strengthens this model. Studies by Japanese researchers (e.g., Qing Li) show that *shinrin-yoku* contributes to measurable reductions in cortisol levels, blood pressure, and stress, supporting both psychological and physiological transformation.

4.2.5.2. Strengths

Japan demonstrates a high degree of integration between culture, science, and policy, particularly in the institutionalization of forest therapy programs and wellness initiatives.

The model offers accessible and scalable forms of transformation, as practices can be adapted across different contexts and do not require extreme conditions.

Additionally, the emphasis on authenticity and everyday culture enhances sustainability and cultural continuity, avoiding over-reliance on staged experiences.

4.2.5.3. Limitations

The subtle and gradual nature of transformation may limit immediate perceived impact, particularly for tourists seeking more dramatic experiences.

Second, cultural practices may be difficult for international visitors to fully understand or engage with, especially without proper interpretation.

Third, while scientifically supported, the model may lack strong emotional intensity, which can be a key driver of transformative learning.

Finally, scaling such experiences while maintaining authenticity presents ongoing challenges.

4.2.6. Costa Rica – Regenerative tourism and ecological transformation

4.2.6.1. Mechanism

Costa Rica’s model is based on regenerative participation, where transformation occurs through active engagement in environmental restoration and community development.

A key mechanism is the integration of tourism with conservation activities, including reforestation, wildlife rehabilitation, and biodiversity monitoring. These experiences create a sense of purpose and contribution, aligning with eudaimonic well-being.

Transformation is further reinforced through experiential learning, where visitors gain knowledge about ecosystems, climate change, and sustainability challenges, leading to long-term behavioral change.

At the cultural level, the philosophy of “Pura Vida” promotes simplicity, gratitude, and connection to nature, shaping both visitor experiences and local interactions.

4.2.6.2. Strengths

Costa Rica demonstrates strong measurable impact, particularly in environmental outcomes. Forest cover increased from 21% in the 1980s to over 52%, making it a global benchmark in reversing deforestation.

The model is supported by robust policy frameworks, such as the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST), which ensures accountability and standardization.

Additionally, the model aligns transformation with tangible social and ecological benefits, enhancing both visitor meaning and local development.

4.2.6.3. Limitations

The model requires high levels of institutional coordination and long-term investment, which may be difficult for other countries to replicate. Second, participatory activities may not appeal to all tourist segments, limiting market reach. Third, there is a risk of “greenwashing” if regenerative claims are not supported by measurable outcomes. Finally, scaling such models without compromising ecological integrity remains a significant challenge.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of Transformative tourism models

No	Destination	Mechanism	Strength	Limitation
1	Bhutan	Policy + spirituality	Strong governance	Limited accessibility
2	Bali	Ritual + facilitation	Deep experiences	Commercialization
3	Peru	Indigenous + challenge	High intensity	Ethical issues
4	Iceland	Nature extremes	Unique assets	Environmental pressure
5	Japan	Mindfulness rituals	Scalable	Subtle impact
6	Costa Rica	Regeneration	Measurable impact	High coordination

Source: Author’s compilation

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Cross-case synthesis: Identifying underlying mechanisms of transformation

The comparative analysis of six international destinations—Bhutan, Bali, Peru, Iceland, Japan, and Costa Rica—reveals that despite substantial differences in cultural context, governance structures, and tourism products, these cases converge around a shared set of underlying mechanisms that enable transformative outcomes.

Rather than representing isolated or culturally specific models, these destinations illustrate recurring patterns through which tourism experiences generate enduring psychological, behavioral, and value-based change. The findings suggest that transformative tourism is not defined by a specific type of activity (e.g., spiritual retreat, nature travel, or cultural immersion), but by the presence of certain structural conditions that activate transformation processes.

Across all six cases, four core dimensions consistently emerge: (1) structured challenge, (2) guided meaning-making, (3) mindful disconnection, and (4) regenerative engagement. These dimensions represent not discrete categories but interrelated mechanisms that jointly facilitate transformation.

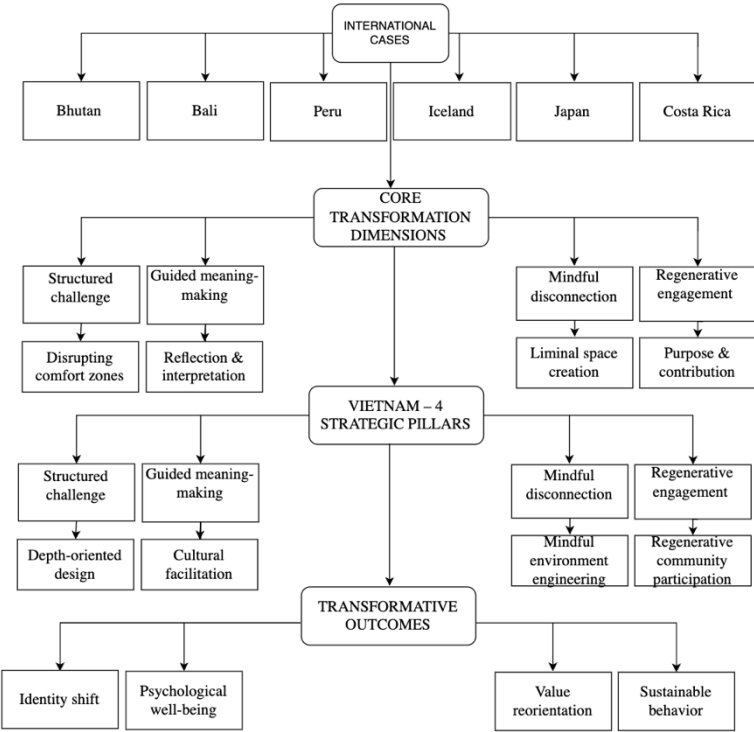


Figure 1. Core dimensions of transformative tourism derived from cross-case analysis

Source: Author’s synthesis from case study analysis

5.1.1. Dimension 1: Structured challenge as a trigger for transformation

The first and most consistent dimension across all cases is the presence of intentional challenge, which functions as the primary trigger for transformative learning. In line with Transformative learning theory [7], transformation begins with a “disorienting dilemma”—an experience that disrupts existing assumptions and forces individuals to reassess their worldview. Each case operationalizes this mechanism differently:

- In Bhutan, the challenge is existential and philosophical, arising from exposure to alternative value systems centered on simplicity and non-material wellbeing.
- In Peru and Iceland, the challenge is physical and environmental, involving high-altitude trekking or extreme natural conditions.
- In Bali and Japan, the challenge is psychological and introspective, requiring individuals to confront silence, ritual discipline, or inner awareness.
- In Costa Rica, the challenge is ethical, prompting reflection on environmental responsibility and human–nature relationships.

These variations demonstrate that transformation does not require intensity in a physical sense alone; rather, it requires intentional disruption of habitual patterns, whether cognitive, emotional, or behavioral. Thus, structured challenge emerges as a universal precondition for transformation, shifting tourism from passive consumption toward active self-engagement.

5.1.2. Dimension 2: Guided meaning-making as a mechanism of integration

While challenge initiates transformation, it does not guarantee it. A second critical dimension observed across all cases is the presence of facilitators who guide meaning-making processes. Without interpretation and reflection, challenging experiences may remain fragmented or even overwhelming. The role of “guides” in transformative tourism extends beyond information provision to include psychological, cultural, and existential mediation:

- In Bhutan, monks and trained guides contextualize spiritual practices within Buddhist philosophy.
- In Bali, yoga instructors, healers (Balian), and retreat facilitators help participants process emotional and introspective experiences.
- In Peru, indigenous shamans and community leaders interpret rituals and cosmology.
- In Japan, structured practices (e.g., tea ceremony, Zen meditation) act as implicit guidance systems embedded in cultural rituals.
- In Costa Rica, environmental educators and conservation practitioners translate ecological engagement into ethical awareness.

This confirms Pine and Gilmore’s assertion [1] that transformation requires a shift from “service providers” to “transformation facilitators.” Importantly, the formality of guidance varies—from explicit mentorship (Bali, Peru) to culturally embedded systems (Japan)—but its function remains consistent to enable reflection, contextualization, and internalization of experience.

5.1.3. Dimension 3: Mindful disconnection as an enabling condition

A third dimension emerging strongly across the cases is the deliberate creation of environments that facilitate disconnection from routine life, allowing space for reflection and self-awareness. Modern tourism is often characterized by overstimulation, digital saturation, and time compression, all of which inhibit deep cognitive and emotional processing. In contrast, transformative destinations intentionally cultivate conditions of: Silence and stillness (Bhutan, Japan); Digital disconnection (Bali’s Nyepi, remote retreats); Spatial isolation (Iceland’s wilderness, Peru’s sacred valley); Temporal slowing (rituals, meditation, slow travel practices).

These environments function as what anthropological theory describes as “liminal spaces” (in which individuals are temporarily separated from their everyday social roles and routines, creating opportunities for reflection, identity reconstruction, and personal transformation [13], [24]. The consistency of this dimension across culturally

distinct contexts suggests that transformation requires not only meaningful activities but also carefully designed environmental conditions that reduce distraction and support introspection.

5.1.4. Dimension 4: Regenerative engagement as a source of meaning and sustainability

The fourth dimension identified across the cases is the integration of purpose-driven, regenerative engagement, where visitors actively contribute to ecological or social systems.

This dimension is particularly evident in: Costa Rica's conservation and restoration programs, Peru's community-based cultural integration, Bhutan's redistribution of tourism revenue through SDF, Emerging sustainability practices in Iceland and Bali.

These experiences move beyond observation toward participation and contribution, allowing travelers to connect their personal transformation with broader societal or environmental impact.

From the perspective of eudaimonic well-being, this dimension is critical, as it links personal growth with purpose, responsibility, and belonging. It also addresses a key limitation of traditional tourism by aligning visitor experience with long-term sustainability outcomes.

Thus, regenerative engagement serves both as a deepening mechanism for transformation and as a bridge between individual and collective wellbeing.

5.2. From global dimensions to Vietnam's strategic pillars: A mechanism-based translation

While the four dimensions identified from international cases provide a robust conceptual framework for understanding how transformative tourism operates, their practical relevance depends on the ability to translate these abstract mechanisms into context-specific strategies. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes a mechanism-based adaptation, in which each dimension is systematically transformed into a corresponding strategic pillar tailored to Vietnam's socio-cultural and institutional context. Table 2 synthesizes this mechanism-to-policy translation.

Rather than presenting the four pillars as independent constructs, this approach establishes a direct functional mapping between global mechanisms and local implementation pathways. This ensures that the proposed framework is not merely inspired by international examples but is analytically grounded in the causal processes that enable transformation.

Table 2. Mechanism-to-pillar mapping from global cases to Vietnam's transformative tourism framework

No	International cases	Core mechanism (dimension)	Vietnam strategic pillar	Key implementation examples
1	Bhutan, Peru, Iceland, Bali, Japan, Costa Rica	Structured challenge	Depth-oriented experiential design	Yên Tử retreat; Phong Nha multi-day immersion; highland trekking experiences
2	Bhutan, Bali, Peru, Japan, Costa Rica	Guided meaning-making	Cultural facilitation	Monk-led reflection; ethnic dialogue programs; healer-guided interpretation
3	Bhutan, Japan, Iceland, Bali	Mindful disconnection	Mindful environment engineering	Low-density zones (Quảng Bình); silence zones; digital-free retreat areas
4	Peru, Costa Rica, Bhutan	Regenerative engagement	Regenerative community participation	Forest restoration (Yên Tử); biodiversity monitoring; craft revival initiatives

Source: Author's synthesis

5.2.1. From structured challenge to depth-oriented experiential design

The first dimension, structured challenge, emphasizes that transformation is triggered when individuals are intentionally pushed beyond their habitual comfort zones. However, in the Vietnamese tourism context - currently characterized by short stays, dense itineraries, and surface-level experiences - such challenge is largely absent.

To operationalize this mechanism, the study translates structured challenge into the pillar of depth-oriented experiential design. This involves redesigning tourism products to incorporate temporal depth (longer stays), experiential intensity (multi-day immersion), and reflective components (journaling, dialogue, guided introspection).

For example, spiritual destinations such as Yên Tử or Trúc Lâm Zen monasteries can be repositioned from sightseeing locations into structured retreat environments, where visitors engage in meditation, silence, and philosophical inquiry. Similarly, nature-based destinations such as Phong Nha – Kẻ Bàng can integrate physically and mentally demanding journeys that stimulate self-reflection rather than passive observation.

Thus, the pillar of depth-oriented design directly operationalizes the mechanism of challenge by embedding intentional difficulty and immersion into tourism experiences.

5.2.2. From guided meaning-making to cultural facilitation

The second dimension, guided meaning-making, highlights that transformation requires structured interpretation of experience. Without facilitation, even highly intense or emotional encounters may fail to produce lasting change. In Vietnam, however, cultural actors (monks, artisans, ethnic elders) are often positioned as performers rather than interpreters. To address this limitation, the study translates this dimension into the pillar of cultural facilitation, which redefines local stakeholders as active mediators of meaning.

This pillar involves: Training cultural actors in storytelling, reflective dialogue, and intercultural communication; Establishing certification systems for “transformation facilitators”; Embedding guided reflection into tourism programs. For instance, ethnic minority communities in the Northern Highlands can facilitate not only homestays but also dialogue-based cultural exchange, where visitors reflect on identity, sustainability, and ways of life. Likewise, traditional medicine practitioners or monks can guide structured sessions on mindfulness, ethics, or philosophy.

Through this translation, the abstract mechanism of meaning-making becomes a concrete institutional and human resource strategy, ensuring that transformative processes are actively supported rather than left to chance.

5.2.3. From mindful disconnection to mindful environment engineering

The third dimension, mindful disconnection, underscores the importance of environmental conditions that enable reflection. Transformation is unlikely to occur in contexts characterized by noise, overcrowding, and digital saturation—conditions increasingly prevalent in Vietnam’s mass tourism destinations.

To operationalize this dimension, the study proposes the pillar of mindful environment engineering, which shifts the focus from activities to spatial and sensory design.

This includes: Establishing low-noise, low-density zones; Limiting digital connectivity in selected areas; Controlling visual pollution (advertising, signage); Designing architecture that harmonizes with nature.

Potential pilot areas include Quảng Bình’s wilderness zones or mountainous regions in Northern Vietnam, where environmental integrity remains relatively intact.

By deliberately designing environments that reduce sensory overload and encourage stillness, this pillar creates the liminal conditions necessary for transformation, directly translating the principle of disconnection into spatial planning and destination management strategies.

5.2.4. From regenerative engagement to regenerative community participation

The fourth dimension, regenerative engagement, demonstrates that transformation deepens when individuals contribute to something beyond themselves. This aligns closely with emerging global trends in purpose-driven travel. In Vietnam, this mechanism is translated into the pillar of regenerative community participation, which repositions tourists as active contributors rather than passive consumers.

This includes: participation in forest restoration (e.g., Tây Yên Tử); Sustainable agriculture with ethnic communities; Biodiversity monitoring in national parks; Revival of traditional crafts.

Such activities generate dual outcomes: they enhance visitor meaning while simultaneously producing tangible benefits for local communities and ecosystems.

Importantly, this pillar addresses a critical limitation of conventional tourism development by aligning individual transformation with collective sustainability, ensuring that tourism contributes to long-term socio-ecological resilience.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the emergence of transformative tourism as a paradigmatic shift from experience-based consumption toward a transformation-oriented economy, in which travel functions as a catalyst for enduring psychological, behavioral, and value-based change. By integrating key theoretical perspectives - including Transformative learning theory, Positive psychology, and Self-determination theory, the research advances a more systematic understanding of how tourism can contribute to long-term human development and eudaimonic well-being.

Moving beyond a purely descriptive or literature-based approach, the study makes a central contribution by identifying four underlying mechanisms of transformation—structured challenge, guided meaning-making, mindful disconnection, and regenerative engagement—derived from a cross-case analysis of six international destinations. These dimensions clarify that transformative tourism is not defined by specific products or niches, but by the presence of enabling conditions that facilitate deep personal change.

Importantly, the paper addresses a critical gap in existing research by developing a mechanism-based translation from global insights to local application. Rather than proposing a generic framework, the study establishes a direct and systematic linkage between the four dimensions and four corresponding strategic pillars for Vietnam:

- (1) Structured challenge (depth-oriented experiential design)
- (2) Guided meaning-making (cultural facilitation)
- (3) Mindful disconnection (mindful environment engineering)
- (4) Regenerative engagement (regenerative community participation)

This mapping ensures conceptual coherence while providing a more actionable foundation for tourism planning and policy.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that Vietnam's competitiveness in the evolving global tourism landscape will depend not on increasing visitor numbers, but on its ability to redesign tourism systems around depth, meaning, and sustainability. However, the

implementation of such a model requires coordinated efforts across multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, destination managers, local communities, and cultural practitioners.

Despite its contributions, the study remains limited by its reliance on secondary data and conceptual synthesis. Future research should incorporate empirical validation, including visitor experience measurement, longitudinal studies on transformative outcomes, and pilot testing of the proposed framework in specific destinations within Vietnam.

Overall, the study positions transformative tourism not only as an emerging trend but as a strategic pathway for aligning tourism development with cultural integrity, ecological resilience, and human flourishing.

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