Article

Transformative Experiences in Cycling Tourism: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract: This research conducts an exhaustive thematic analysis to explore the prospects as well as to create a conceptual framework for transformative experiences in cycling tourism. Using rigorous familiarisation, block and file techniques, recurring themes and patterns are identified, revealing insights into shared characteristics and potential synergies between transformative tourism (TT) and cycling tourism (CT), contributing to a deeper understanding of the transformative power of cycling experiences within the broader context of tourism that should further aid in the integration of such transformative experiences in CT. The results show that both TT and CT represent distinctive yet interconnected typologies within the realm of tourism. Several similarities are presented from an almost-mirrored tourist profile, inclination towards sustainable and regenerative tourism, assimilation of slow-tourism, immersive and eudaimonic experiences, well-being, reflection, and personal development opportunities. Based on these insights, this research introduces an innovative integration of both concepts, offering a distinct and enriching tourism experience by enhancing the transformative power of cycling experiences. The article provides practical implications for industry practitioners involved in tourism design and management and opens avenues for future investigations vital to the commencement of this typology, such as the development of theoretical frameworks, innovative perspectives, and evidence-based recommendations for tourism stakeholders.

Keywords: transformative tourism experiences; cycling tourism; literature review; conceptual framework; thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Tourism is a well-known complex phenomenon that can produce a great variety of experiences, and within this realm, both TT and CT have garnered considerable attention in the past few years, especially considering their effects on the environment, tourists, and local communities [1–4]. TT's nature encompasses the ability to develop resilience throughout these times, personal development, self-discovery and self-reflection that could ultimately lead to profound shifting and transformations in one's perspective, beliefs, values, and identity [5]. In contrast, CT comprises travel activities that revolve around cycling and exploration [6], mostly accentuating its physical or mental benefits [7–9] as well as its devotion to environmental sustainability [10–12]. CT is an active, accessible, yet sustainable type of tourism, constantly promoting the well-being of individuals as well as protecting the environment [13,14] through its main mode of transportation, which are the main reasons for its growing interest in recent years. Despite the fact that CT is a long-studied domain in the tourism industry, especially on its benefits on physical health [15] socio-economic and environmental benefits, little to no attention is given to its transformative potential upon its consumers. Thematic analysis has long been
utilised in tourism as a means of understanding rich bodies of descriptive text and interpreting them in order to acknowledge potential major themes, ongoing or upcoming trends, and key dimensions and establish their intertwined connections, building foundations of new theoretical grounds [16]. Moreover, it becomes of aid in the cases of further conceptualising tourism-related frameworks such as ones related to crisis management in tourism [17] or creative tourism [18], surpassing the role of a bibliometric or review analysis by critically providing in-depth and innovative connections between the findings.

Thus, this research aims to fill a knowledge gap in the existing literature and create a conceptual framework of transformative experiences in CT by conducting a thematic analysis of the articles published in the Web of Science Core Collection (WoSCC) on both concepts as a means to discern and identify the common elements between them, promoting a deeper and more comprehensive idea of how these two typologies would interact with each other, in order to subsequently open multiple possibilities to sprout much more complex experiences in CT, which favour personal growth, awareness of the environment but also of one’s own person, thus tilting the balance towards transformative experiences. This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What does the current research offer to conceptualise transformative experiences in CT?
2. What are the common elements between the two typologies?
3. What opportunities for further research are available for TT experiences in CT?

As TT is considered fairly new on the tourism scene, several studies have started exploring the depths and the role of transformative experiences in different types of tourism. In this regard, this article emphasises this gap as well as the need for interdisciplinarity research between the two typologies of tourism, especially within the context of the existence of only one article that embodies both concepts, the stage of the study of this phenomenon, thus being in its infancy, thereby if further studied could open a novel area in the tourism realm. The possibility of CT experiences evolving from simple exploration-based itineraries to activities that include personal development, reflection, and transformation is highlighted and further explored in this research.

This research aims to explore the transformative potential of CT experiences, boosting their transformative nature through their distinctive attributes of resilience, authentic encounters, as well as natural immersion encountered during cycling itineraries. Moreover, the research identifies themes such as personal development, self-reflection, cultural understanding, and environmental awareness that emerge from both types of experiences, further contributing to the understanding of CT’s potential intersection with the broader concept of TT. The findings provide value to tourists, facilitators, and researchers interested in the transformative power of tourism experiences while also highlighting the potential blueprints to follow in order to incorporate transformative experiences into cycling itineraries.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Transformative Tourism

Under the circumstances of new consumption patterns towards more significant journeys [5], which include social, environmental, and economic revitalisation [19], as well as the desire of newer generations to have different experiences than hedonistic ones [20], researchers have unanimously agreed that there is a requirement for something beyond experiential travel. These new ways of thinking, knowing and being, acting, and interacting [21] are moving towards a regenerative paradigm through the authenticity of experience, its subjectivity, the co-creation element by involving the vision of all actors, as well as the destination, increasing responsibility, resilience, and immersion in the tourism phenomenon. TT aligns with existing tourism typologies, primarily forming eudaimonic experiences, as opposed to hedonistic ones, and transformative experiences, primarily
marked by permanent and irreversible changes [5] in one’s perspective of the self and the surrounding world, emphasising the last three stages of Maslow’s 1943 hierarchy of needs [22] with a focus on the final stage of self-transcendence and self-realisation. It is generally characterised by intentionality [23], as most individuals require openness and the desire for change, immersion [24], whether it is natural, cultural, or social contexts, and self-reflection [25] that transcribes as the active reflection on the changes throughout the journey.

Transformation is everywhere, whether it is encountered in movies [26,27], books [28], or even fairy tales like Cinderella. It is depicted as Campbell’s “hero’s journey”, in which an individual sets off and, following the stages completed along the journey, their perspectives on themselves and the world are transformed [29]. Following the same line, this journey was later approached scientifically by Mezirow through the stages of transformative learning, at the end of which the individual gains a new perspective, referred to in this case as transformative [30]. The presentation of Maslow’s hierarchy, the hero’s journey, and Mezirow’s theory are not coincidental, as they laid the foundations for TT.

According to Duerden et al., 2019 (p. 208), a transformative experience is a conscious yet extraordinary experience that has the capacity to induce subjective reactions, being often characterised by intrinsic and enduring motivations in one’s self-perception and behaviour as it involves intense emotions, the discovery of meaningful insights, and changes in values, beliefs, intentions, and self-perceptions [31]. So far, most of these unmatched experiences are encountered in nature-based tourism [1], in places such as retreats [32], on spiritual journeys [33], during wellness programs [34], or even in educational experiences [35]. TT is described as being a eudaimonic experience [36], contributing mostly to well-being, personal development and self-reflection and pointing to the desire to create an overall better and more meaningful life. There is an interplay between transformative experiences and emotions, as the latter could contribute to both personal development and challenging already existing perspectives of life [37]. A more sustainable, reliable and inclusive future is wishful thinking, and yet through transformation, all this could be achieved as it succeeds in establishing cultural understanding, increasing awareness of nature and society, and echoing positive changes in values, ideas and behaviours. TT could be described as having a chameleonic nature [38] and can embellish a variety of types of tourism, as it is highly individualised, being mostly dependent on the ethos of all the participants involved in the process and put into play by a series of catalysers that subsequently lead to transformation [38]. Therefore, its nature needs to be further explored in more types of tourism [39].

2.2. Cycling Tourism

CT is slowly gaining appreciation in the tourism scene [7,40], as it can provide several benefits encompassing the environment and the socio-economic sphere [41] by offering a cheap and reliable modality of transportation [42]. In this way, that can influence the whole tourism act towards a far more sustainable one, providing benefits to tourists on the one hand, as well as to the destinations’ area and its residents on the other hand [43], enhancing the overall tourism experience [44]. Features such as eco-friendliness, health and wellness, slow tourism, and authentic experiences in a post-pandemic world align well with the current trends and demands of travellers, making it have significant market potential [41]. CT is versatile and is characterised mainly by the mode of transportation used; therefore, combining it with other types of tourism or activities and tourist packages can further boost demand for this type of tourism. Consequently, bike tourism has been studied in various events, whether for charity, cultural, or sports-competitive purposes [45] or even together with the usage of other elements such as wine tourism [46]. Even cycling events have positive effects on tourists, allowing them to access the inner world of participants [45] and increasing their sense of belonging to a destination or a larger social group [47]. After reviewing articles on CT, Ciascai et al. 2022 claimed that it can lead to a
variety of benefits on a global level, mainly in the spheres of economic, social, and environmental sustainability [12]. Therefore, tourism on a bicycle could be a great potential candidate to foster transformative experiences, as only by briefly reviewing the designated literature, certain characteristics such as destination immersion, physical and psychological well-being, and sustainable behaviour align with TT and thus have the ability to facilitate the integration of such experiences in the tourism realm.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

This section presents the methodology employed in conducting the research to further investigate the common ground between transformative and cycling tourism by identifying and synthesising relevant literature found in the Web of Science Core Collection database. This platform was selected because it is considered one of the most reputable and comprehensive databases commonly used by researchers to seek trustworthy and valuable research [48].

To ensure the accuracy of the information as well as to provide a structured and targeted search to obtain key literature for the construction of the conceptual framework, a modified version of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flowchart was employed [49], resulting in four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, as shown in Figure 1. By complying with the PRISMA guidelines and implementing this meticulous methodology, the aim of the research is defined by employing a comprehensive analysis of the commonalities between TT and CT, which could further provide a more detailed understanding of the relationship between these two concepts with a focus of finding key elements for building up a conceptual framework, as well as further aiding in future research or/and practical approaches in tourism regarding transformative experiences in cycling tourism.
In order to establish the potential connections between the concepts, a search strategy was developed to capture relevant articles that explored common elements between the two concepts. As this topic is scarcely found in the academic literature, with the aim of meeting the common elements between the two typologies to initiate a new path towards conceptualising transformative experiences in cycling tourism, both research on CT and TT have been considered in parallel. A series of keywords was applied to the database to collect information on both transformative and cycling tourism, including several variations of keywords to capture the synonymous terms associated with these two concepts. The chosen keywords were combined using Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR) to refine the search strategy. The search was conducted using the query string (‘transformati* travel’ OR ‘transformati* tourism’) OR (‘cycl* tourism’ or ‘cycl* travel’) OR (‘bike tourism’ or ‘bike travel’). Wildcards (*) were used to represent a group of characters, as both concepts could be found under several terminologies. Therefore, ‘transformative’ and ‘transformational’ were included, as they are commonly used interchangeably in the literature. In terms of CT, variations such as ‘cycle’, ‘cycling’, and ‘bike’ were incorporated to encompass different ways of referring to this type of tourism.

The search strategy was first attempted using both ‘transformative tourism’ and ‘cycling’ as the main keywords in a single query string; however, the initial search did not yield any results in this regard. Therefore, it was necessary to use parallel variations (separately) in keywords to capture a wider range of relevant articles. The intersection of these two concepts is relatively scarce in the existing literature, as only one article explicitly combines both ‘bike tourism’ and ‘transformative tourism’, further demonstrating the novelty of the subject and highlighting the available literature on this topic at the moment; therefore any new information on how these concepts could build a strong beneficial connection together gains research value. The query string was applied to the entire article structure (not only for the abstract, title, or keywords).

During the screening procedure, only articles from the Web of Science Core Collection database published in peer-reviewed journals were included to ensure the credibility of the sources, maintain a focus on high-quality studies, and provide a consistent analysis. Therefore, books, theses, proceedings, and editorials were excluded from the research. Moreover, only articles published in English were selected to avoid any difficulties in translation and interpretation and to ensure language proficiency among the research team (articles in seven other languages were therefore excluded from the study). Another criterion was the specified timeframe, as the search was conducted until 15 May 2023, to include the most recent studies. Therefore, publications that appeared after the aforementioned date were excluded from this research. The final step in the screening process consisted of removing duplicate articles (n = 23).

The inclusion criteria were predefined, based on research questions and objectives, focusing on the relevance of the articles to the objective of identifying the core elements that could possibly be shared between TT and CT (articles that specifically addressed or explored the dimensions of both were considered relevant). The third eligibility phase consisted of an evaluation of full texts of articles in which irrelevant articles were excluded, which included research on topics other than those desired to be outlined, such as research on improvements in the performance of automated warehousing systems [50] or warehousing designs [51]. Any endeavour that does not suggest relevant publications that emphasise the characteristics of TT or CT is deemed irrelevant and, therefore, excluded from the study. The fourth stage of inclusion focused on reading the full text of the articles, which met the research objectives that were available online and relevant to the research aim.

From initially 234 entries, following the PRISMA analysis, 156 articles have been found eligible and included in the research, such as articles that presented common
elements between the two typologies as well as core articles (most cited, new publications on the topics analysed, etc.). During the research selection process, all three authors screened both the titles and abstracts in order to retrieve full-text articles to be further included in the study only if they met the inclusion and matched the exclusion criteria, therefore having relevance to the research questions. Data extraction regarding key findings was synthesised to identify common elements and themes across the selected studies, which were later merged and exported into an Excel spreadsheet for qualitative analysis.

3.2. Data Analysis and Sub-Theme Formulation

A qualitative approach with inductive tendencies has been followed throughout the research as it stems from a specific observation to the recognition of patterns and common characteristics, concluding in a general idea that aims to further produce explanatory ideas and models [52] by discovering unexpected connections, novel insights, and complementarities.

The common ground between both transformative and CT was established by conducting a thematic analysis as it is fairly used for its accessibility for identifying, analysing, organising, and establishing themes found within a data set [53], to highlight similarities, and useful for summarising key features of a large data set in a well-structured manner [54].

To assess the trustworthiness of the qualitative approach [55], investigator triangulation was used throughout the research by involving all the researchers in the literature review process of collecting, analysing, and coding the existing literature data, more precisely by following independent parallel coding [56]. The content was further scrutinised, resulting in the research team reaching a consensus regarding the common characteristics, recurring concepts, patterns and possible connections identified in the text, tables as well as figures within the articles.

The review findings were analysed in a structured manner using a modified framework involving familiarisation, block and filing, mapping, and interpretation [52]. Familiarisation included an initial examination to further create sub-themes that were subsequently blocked and filed [52]. After thorough research in the literature, a core understanding of both typologies has been formed, therefore having the capacity to recognise key concepts, early themes, and patterns, detecting potential overlaps or linkages between the two. All the studies encountered several subthemes that were blocked and filed. An example would be the possibility of educating oneself on sustainability in TT and the eco-friendly behaviour encountered by cycling tourists that were later filed under the sustainable development section. Owing to space limitations and visibility, only one example is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example Case 1 (Transformative Tourism)</th>
<th>Block and File (Common Dimensions)</th>
<th>Example Case 2 (Cycling Tourism)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;This experience was fundamental in providing him with a broadened perspective on consumption and environmental conservation, which made him more aware of harmful everyday practices and then&quot;</td>
<td>Pro-environmental awareness</td>
<td>&quot;Cycling causes virtually no environmental damage, promotes health through physical activity, takes up little space and is economical, both in direct user costs and public infrastructure&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable development</td>
<td>Sustainable means of transportation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Block and file methodology exemplification based on Grbich, C. (2013) research [52].
affected his attitude upon return”
(Pung et al. 2019, p. 10) [57]

“Transformational tourism promotes well-being and reduces mental health anomalies. The study (...) reported satisfaction and induced environmentally friendly behaviour after serving the community and environment at tourist destinations”
(Bhalla, Chowdhary, 2022, p.1) [59]

“(…) cycling tourism as an alternative and green way of travel during holidays has gained popularity.”
(Pantelaki et al., 2022, p.1) [60]

“(…) encouraging transformative tourism (...) building a sustainable society”
(Li et al., 2022, p. 13) [61]

As a final step in this methodology and for a clearer schematisation of the information obtained, a conceptual map was designed to depict the connections between TT and CT in relation to their common characteristics. This illustration, as well as the interpretation of the findings, are later exposed throughout this research. Due to the high volume of total research, or even elements that could not provide enough to sustain and form an entire thematic cluster, some characteristics might have been unintentionally overlooked. Nevertheless, the common elements identified and presented in the research signify the themes that appeared most frequently and prominently after meticulous analysis and consensus among researchers. The above-mentioned methodology aimed to increase the dependability of this research by minimising any potential biases as well as guaranteeing
the relevance and high quality of the chosen articles by adhering to the inclusion and exclusion criteria and further usage of investigator triangulation.

4. Findings

4.1. Similarities between TT and CT

Highlighting the similarities between the two typologies can lead to several strategic advantages, such as the ability to appeal to a broader range of consumers with slightly different preferences, as well as providing customer loyalty, as tourists may be more prone to try similar tourism products from the same provider. The overlapping of the two concepts would increase the chance of propagation and transferability of ideas through collaborations of experts from both fields, with a chance to promote interdisciplinarity and increase the general understanding of both types of tourism. This transferability could increase the chances for a similar concept to be more easily integrated or accepted by all the parties involved, as the familiarity of the ideas provides trust. It could produce a number of relevant advantages, especially in shaping a brand, but also economic advantages, as resources, infrastructure and field of expertise overlap to a certain extent, reducing significantly overall expenses but also risks, leading to much higher security and profitability. By following the almost same core patterns it can improve the capacity for learning and even create new ideas, resulting in the emergence of innovative branches intertwined from both concepts, providing solutions to common issues that converge from both concepts, resulting in a higher potential for implementation, development, and true success in the tourism industry as a combined concept.

4.1.1. Eudaimonic Experiences

TT contributes to both hedonic and eudaimonic experiences [63], yet as its nature thrives in the discovery of self, personal growth, and construction of identity, it aligns more with the eudaimonic experiences [64]. In their research on transformative tourism and its facilitators and inhibitors, Pung and Del Chiappa (2020) observed that while discussing the long-lasting effects of their transformation, participants reported experiencing eudaimonic well-being, rather than a hedonic one, transformation becoming one of the main elements in eudaimonic experiences [25].

Bicycle travel has the ability to augment any experience [65], as it provides more positive benefits even than walking, especially regarding mental health [66], ultimately enhancing well-being [67], whether it is of hedonic [68] or eudaimonic nature [69]. Mobility could aid in flourishing the places visited [70], encountering locals along the way, and contributing later to well-being [71]. Eudaimonic experiences could be seen as a form of serious leisure, and the latter is positively associated with cycling tourists’ level of satisfaction and quality of life [72]. Cycling could enhance mood and overall feelings of well-being, with an existent positive relation between cycling, self-actualisation, self-efficacy dimensions, and positive mood [73]. Another factor that could contribute to well-being is the relationship between the human and their bicycles as well as the role of culture, both playing an important role in providing welfare [13] or the capacity of cycling events to provide a certain level of sense of belonging and development of personal experiences and meanings [47]. Therefore, cycling has the power to yield individual and societal benefits as well as maintain and improve the well-being of local communities [74]. These eudaimonic benefits should be included in the cost-benefit analyses to further seize the advantages of cycling [73]. Yet, it should be considered that in cycling, subjective well-being may be disrupted by different circumstances, such as traffic pollution, poor quality of pavements or bicycle lanes, or even lack of safety measures [75]. In contrast, in cycling tours, well-maintained bicycles and knowledgeable tour guides are important for providing pleasurable experiences to enhance tourists’ satisfaction [76].

4.1.2. Personal Growth and Well-Being
As described earlier, both types of tourism have the capacity to maintain experiences that have a eudaimonic effect on the individuals, and very often, these experiences have outcomes such as personal development and overall increased well-being. TT could lead to long-lasting changes, whether perceptual or behavioural [1,31], that could potentially instigate self-reflection [37] that ultimately leads to personal growth [77]. Soulard (2021) unearthed that TT can demonstrate all-encompassing worldwide outlooks, promote intercultural comprehension, and bestow social empowerment [78]. The capacity to change human consciousness and promote inner peace and freedom is outlined by the desire to contribute to the common good, which usually involves a deep engagement within oneself or between people and the environment [24]. The improvement of psychological, physiological, socio-economic, and environmental conditions, along with visitor satisfaction and loyalty to destinations, can occur during transformative travel, as Wolf et al. (2017) observed during their research on protected areas [1].

Weighting in its capabilities to be in alignment with eco-friendly attitudes [79], as well as enhancing mental and physical health, or even sculpting cyclists’ perception of their sense of well-being along this process [13], CT is expected to experience a tourism boom in the upcoming years mainly due to the nature of its activities. Even though it is less evident in the context of CT, the desire for personal development can also take root during bicycle rides. In certain contexts, such as mountain biking or challenging terrains, resilience and self-confidence can be developed, highlighting the transformative nature of participants in overcoming physical and mental challenges in their daily lives, improving cognitive abilities, a constant desire for self-improvement in skills and personal capacities, perseverance, and pride in personal achievements, all leading to attitudinal and behavioural changes [80] and ultimately fostering personal growth. A main motivation while choosing a destination in the case of serious mountain bikers is reflected by their ability to progress in their sports activities [81]. Following the same pattern, serious leisure cyclists are mainly motivated by the challenges encountered along the way as well as their inclination towards gaining personal development that comes along with sports activities [82].

4.1.3. Sustainable Development

CT stands out as part of the emerging trend as being one of the most sustainable forms of tourism [4,14,79], gradually appealing to the principles of sustainable development [83]. It falls under the category of environmentally friendly tourism [3,58], posing less risk of damage to fragile environments and historical landmarks. It has various connections to sustainability [11], primarily due to its fundamental mode of transportation, the bicycle, which is seen as a trendy means of transportation, especially in the context of bicycle sharing [84], being affordable and presenting opportunities for a healthy lifestyle [85]. Cycling connects with the environment and the social dimension, resulting in physical and mental benefits, making it the primary motivation for travel [4]. The use of bicycles allows tourists to stay active, explore their surroundings in a much more immersive manner, interact with locals, and therefore experience the authentic aspects of the destination [6], all with a minimal impact and a low carbon footprint [86]. The recreational aspect of cycling falls under active mobility, acting not only as an adjunct to sustainability [87] but also as a means to promote behavioural changes [88], leading to cascading benefits for health, climate, economy, environment, and air quality [89] and connecting bicycle tourism to sustainable behaviours [7]. In addition to recreational CT, there is also competitive or endurance cycling, which can be categorised as an extreme sport. Even in this case, the principles of sustainability can be followed, as extreme sports have been found to promote care for the environment and sustainable practices, connecting individuals with the surrounding environment and leading to deep personal changes [90].

In times like this, there is a need for different, transformed views and ways of acting toward a more sustainable future [91]. There have been studies on the relationship between transformative experiences, well-being, and sustainable tourism [92] as
transformative learning, especially in ecotourism contexts, could further aid in tourists developing sustainable behaviours [93], opening roads for further education and learning potential on sustainability, especially on short-term study abroad programs [94], as transformative learning is an important factor in sustainable voluntourism by educating, enlightening participants towards sustainable outcomes [95]. This type of tourism could further encourage practising sustainable behaviours [96] by immersing participants into the environment [93] and therefore gaining compassion towards the surroundings [59] and having the ability to learn and practice environmentally friendly activities such as planting trees [93] or increased awareness towards water consumption [94]. In studying prosocial behaviours in students, Li et al., 2022 find it beneficial for TT to be used as a tool in this regard as it could help promote long-lasting prosocial behaviour in students as well as further build a sustainable society [61]. Transformative travel is also very much linked to sustainable tourism [1] as it can have a positive environmental impact as many are centred around nature-based activities and, therefore, can help raise awareness about environmental issues and contribute to the preservation of natural ecosystems, inspiring tourists to adopt more sustainable practices, becoming more conscious of their impact, leading to more responsible behaviours.

4.1.4. Slow Tourism

In line with the tenets of sustainable development, slow tourism contributes to the overarching objective of attaining sustainability by nurturing favourable engagements among individuals, locations, and the environment. Besides the previously mentioned characteristics, both can meet other criteria defined by Caffyn (2009) as belonging to slow tourism [97]. A primary example would be longer journeys, with cyclists showing a preference for such trips [98,99] and making stops along the way to explore the route. The slow-travel infrastructure connects local areas and regenerates dispersed heritage, valourising the area at its true worth [43]. On the other hand, although TT can also occur in shorter contexts, it is more likely to happen on longer journeys [100] when there is no time constraint [101]. Yet the duration of stay can also explore the shorter side of a vacation but with intensive activities such as cultural shocks or extreme challenges and pushing the limits in the case of transformative experiences or short day visits in the case of CT. Both types of tourism thrive in experiential, immersive contexts and involve a slower manner of exploring all dimensions of a destination. This deeper engagement with different contexts can subsequently lead to a sense of belonging to the people and the destination and even touch on existential issues, resulting in authentic and high-quality experiences [102–104].

4.1.5. Tendency towards a Regenerative Approach

Even if the encouragement of sustainability is an important step to achieve in tourism development, encompassing most tourism strategies nowadays, further steps should be applied in order to revitalise destinations and reutilise the resources, especially in the tourism domain. Since TT aims to move towards a more sustainable future for all parties involved, such as the local community, tourists, but also the destination, the revitalising aspect appears in its ability to promote ecological behaviours, to maintain and support sustainable development in a destination but at the same time to successfully overcome the tourist crises by aligning with the post-pandemic tourism demands of consumers, especially after COVID-19, when the significant changes in human consciousness inclined towards a more transformative form of tourism [105] transformation, therefore, becoming a focal point in nowadays’ tourism [19]. It can also produce psychotherapeutic healing to humans, especially in spiritually inclined nature-based settings [106], and also enhance the environment by strengthening the image of a destination and evoking emotions that ultimately improve loyalty to the destination [1]. TT can also induce and provide an overall responsible view [107] by shifting the values and attitudes of tourists towards a destination, contributing to the renewal and restoration of tourist destinations, thus
building a different future for tourism [24]. Furthermore, transformative experiences are subjective and co-created [108], considered to be an important element within the regenerative framework based on social contexts where local host communities play an essential role in providing immersive experiences for visitors [109,110]. These contexts between the community and tourists can strengthen appreciation for nature, the lifestyle of the hosts, and the destination itself, resulting in heightened social and ecological consciousness [59] and mindset changes such as increased compassion, empathy, and symbiosis among participants in tourism [24].

On the other hand, CT can also revitalise destinations, as pictured by Petino’s (2021) work on Sicilian hinterlands, as bicycle tourists spend considerable amounts of time and money in specific areas [111], potentially assisting in the revitalisation of regional and rural areas [112]. Gazzola (2018) highlights that the development of this type of tourism in certain areas can bring economic, social, and environmental benefits [4], especially to local economies [14], as it can contribute significantly to rural economies and, therefore, have an overall positive impact on communities [12], as bicycle lanes can boost local economies [113] providing access to neglected cultural and environmental resources. It can also boost lesser-known territories by making use of their environmental and cultural resources in tourism development [114], thus creating a series of benefits to rural economies that have not previously experienced mainstream tourism development [115].

4.1.6. Natural Immersion

Whether it’s about cycling on trails that have scenic views in nature or engaging in nature-based activities during transformative experiences, both typologies show appreciation for all that the environment has to offer, as through immersion, tourists are able to establish a connection with nature, leading to one appreciating and understanding it more, resulting in fostering greater responsibility for nature, and a willingness to minimise their non-environmental consumption patterns and further promote sustainable behaviours. Natural landscapes could evoke a sense of awe and connection with nature that can ultimately lead to and inspire personal reflection, emotional well-being, and transformative experiences [1], as surrounding oneself by nature [116] implies immersing into a different world [93] mainly by interacting with the wildlife [117]. Transformative experiences could be enhanced in nature-based tourism, encouraging tourists to adopt values and behaviours aimed at preserving the environment that ultimately aligns with regenerative approaches [59]. In a study about nature-based ecosanctuary in New Zealand, Richardson (2021) found out that these transformative outcomes could be experienced en-route rather than just post-trip [101]; therefore, TT could be considered as a medium for reinventing oneself and the world [21].

Scenic views and appropriate cycling infrastructure is also the main motivating factor for cycling tourists in Greece [6]; natural settings, including mountains and nature, are also important travel motivator for sport cycling tourists in Banff National Park, Canada [118]. Therefore, special attention should be given to the quality of the environment, including landscape and cleanliness, as in Taiwan, it is considered an important factor that, if not properly sustained, could further affect the recreational benefits and number of trips taken by cyclists [119].

4.1.7. Cultural Immersion and Community Engagement

Following its capability to establish meaningful connections with both the natural environment and local communities, immersion during a travel experience becomes a critical turn in the development of transformative tourism experiences [23,35,120] as immersing oneself with the local communities, and becoming entangled in one’s culture and traditions can further develop new perspectives of others and self, fostering social responsibility and understanding of one another and deepening bonds between tourists and residents, leading to a transformative impact on their consciousness and lives in positive ways [121]. A good example of local people getting involved in the process of
creating such experiences and also involving the tourists would be research conducted at a small beer brewery in Thailand, where an individual involved in homebrewing managed to follow a transformative leadership pattern by establishing strategies that involved a combination of values and pre-conditions for staged experiences in the co-creative context in order to create transformative and meaningful experiences [122].

Community engagement plays a pivotal role in cycling events as it garners immense appreciation from participants due to the profound sense of belonging to a cohesive “cycling community” fostered by social interactions with fellow riders, volunteers, and community members, facilitated by event organisers who are promoting non-competitive ethos, ultimately nurturing a strong emotional connection and inclusivity [123], the latter referring to embracing different cultures by exchanging ideas with residents or even create deeper bonds among cyclists, enhancing the overall appreciation of one’s environment and cultural richness.

4.1.8. Tourist Profile

Both transformative tourists and cycling tourists belong to the category of responsible tourists, being more attentive to the impact they have on the destination and the local community. According to UNWTO (2016), transformative tourists are young to middle-aged, highly educated, long-term stayers who are conscious of both the social and environmental footprint [124]. They value and support sustainability and the local economy, seeking personal development, finding purpose in life, and engaging in meaningful travel experiences [124]. They are often characterised as being driven by a special interest [124]. This “special interest” could manifest itself in CT as well, as stated by Simonsen et al. (1998). Cycling tourists also follow this trend, with ages ranging from 25 to 49 years old, having medium and higher education, and an average vacation duration of 5 to 14 days. They often source their own food or purchase locally, and their travel goals go beyond purely economic reasons, focusing on experiencing new things and engaging in active vacations [125]. Even at the level of motivations of recreational and leisure cyclists, connections with TT are established, as cyclists’ desires revolve around gaining skills, mastery, solitude, exploration, physical challenge, adventure, seeking stimulation, social encounters, relaxation/escape, happiness, belonging, and self-esteem [126]. These motivations are similar to those found in transformative tourism experiences.

4.1.9. Personal and General Resilience

Significant changes in global consciousness during the pandemic context have also impacted consumer preferences in tourism, shifting towards a more transformative form of tourism [105], capable of adapting to the current times, focusing on the need for increased well-being, personal development, immersion in local culture, responsible and conscious tourism and more. By its nature, TT could address and respond to some of the challenges encountered in the post-pandemic period, becoming one of the most sought choices of travel during these times [106], including avoiding over-tourism, promoting reconnection between individuals and nature, increasing awareness of sustainability, improving living conditions, and reshaping old mentalities, among others.

On the other hand, some aspects that could positively shape the post-pandemic period in terms of CT are worth noting, as Eurovelo (2022) stated that during 2019–2021, there was an increase in usage of the EuroVelo Cycle Network [127]. Besides general resilience, both types of tourism also exhibit personal resilience, as some transformations occur after overcoming physical limits [35,128], leading to personal resilience [24]. This is also reflected in CT when cyclists experience personal resilience by overcoming obstacles or traversing more challenging routes [80]. Therefore, combining these two typologies may become the successful answer to a regenerative tourism alternative in the post-pandemic period. Figure 2 is a representation of the common elements between cycling and TT.
Despite having many similarities, both types of tourism differ in definitions and purpose, in their fundamental characteristics, motivations, and the typology of their activities. Considering such aspects becomes vital, especially when developing strategies and implementing tourist experiences that include the intersection of these two concepts. According to the Transformational Travel Council, TT is defined as “intentionally travelling to stretch, learn, and grow into new ways of being and engaging with the world” [129]. Therefore, TT aims to facilitate personal transformation through contextual stimuli and adjunct elements, such as cognitive, affective and other psychological factors. While according to Sustrans, CT is defined by “recreational visits, either overnight or day visits away from home, which involve leisure cycling as a fundamental and significant part of the visit” [130]. TT generally involves quite important life events that can challenge beliefs and shift perspectives, leading to personal development and self-discovery that ultimately results in permanent behavioural changes. CT, even though it may seek experiences such as cultural or environmental ones, the main objective is not transformation, but rather experiences that are less of a complex nature, recreational activities predominantly based on cycling (exploration, scenic admiration) through the means of transportation—the bicycle—that is considered to be an ecological and more sustainable mode of transport [131]. The latter falls under the category of active mobility [87], with cycling routes promoting the concept of slow tourism (referring to the mode of transportation).

Transformative experiences are primarily characterised by static elements, preferring local, cultural, and social immersion (another form of slow tourism). TT, by its nature, can lead to changes in perspectives (behaviour, education, worldview), with experiences being much more mentally intense. On the other hand, CT includes stimulating and intensive experiences, but due to the nature of the activities, it focuses more on the physical aspect (physical changes, distance covered, resilience). It is based on the experience during the trip given by the exploratory component along the route in relation to natural, cultural, historical, and even sporting elements, whether in rural or urban areas. On the other hand, transformative experiences go beyond physical aspects, joining with different types of tourism such as voluntourism, educational tourism, well-being, religious, spiritual, etc.

Even if CT has a significant role in providing the hedonistic realm of tourism, engaging in the happiness of cycling, the need for exploration, and other physical activities, it can also follow a eudaimonic approach in different circumstances, yet not as a main purpose. At the other end of the spectrum, we find TT, which thrives on eudaimonic
experiences [25] at its core; activities that focus on well-being, personal development, and cultural understanding are being provided and promoted.

In the case of transformative tourists, they often travel independently, having well-defined values, requirements, and intentions even before their journey regarding their desire for personal development and openness to transformation [124]. Cyclists, on the other hand, are driven by benefits related to physical health, adventure, relaxation, and exploration and have the desire to visit natural and cultural attractions, often travelling in pairs or groups [125]. It is worth noting that travelling in groups, which is common in CT, can sometimes inhibit the transformative process, especially when familiarity within the group hinders individual openness to transformation [25]. However, groups with a similar mindset can enhance this endeavour, as through social interactions, special bonds between tourists or even the local community can be formed, taking the name of communitas [132], which could aid in promoting cultural understanding, learning new or traditional skills and acquire inclusive knowledge, all of which could further morph into transformations of one’s perspectives.

One last aspect that could be mentioned in this category is the level of preparation for the two types of tourism. In the case of CT, the focus is on the infrastructure of the routes, their preparation, establishing the paths, stops, and scenic views, and highlighting the main attractions encountered along the way, including difficulty and slope (material aspects). In contrast, TT requires a high level of sustained effort from all participants, involving preparation and guidance for transformation, immersive engagement with locals, co-creativity, and the design of transformative experiences, therefore emphasising the immaterial aspects of this type of tourism.

Despite their differences, both TT and CT are mutually reinforced by each other with the ability to further enhance already existing features of both concepts, resulting in a quite complex experience that could encompass a thorough tourism preparation, offering both mental and physical stimulation as well as hedonic and eudaimonic experiences, entailing static or active elements, becoming an inclusive type of tourism for both independent tourists or larger groups, with the main motivations ranging from obtaining recreational aspects of a trip to even reaching up to life-changing experiences.

5. Discussion

5.1. Transformative Experiences in CT

Even if there are studies carried out individually on both types of tourism, there is a lack of knowledge in terms of carrying out a comparative thematic analysis between the two concepts in order to highlight the potential elements that could become adjuvants in the implementation and further development of these experiences combining these two concepts. Considering that the results of the study highlight the complementarity of the two types of tourism, it can be said that they have the capacity to improve each other, both by developing expertise in common fields and by learning from the differentiating points, propelling the cycling tourism experience towards a complex typology, with activities that mark varied experiences, aimed at self-reflection and personal development. Finally, it can be mentioned that this research has an adjuvant role for facilitators wishing to implement such experiences on the one hand, but also for researchers to fill research gaps on this new direction of transformative experiences in CT on the other hand.

Drawing the line from this research, it can be observed that there is a high transferability between the characteristics of both typologies, whether it is in the context of building personal or general resilience, immersing oneself in natural or cultural contexts, encouraging slow, sustainable but also regenerative tourism, develop appreciation of local communities and also of one’s own heritage, as well as establishing connection with other tourists, all could ultimately enhance the already existing experiences to another level, opening new avenues for transformative experiences in cycling tourism.
Considering the historical approach of testing ideas and concepts through the “trial and error” principle, it is suggested that initial action in aligning the findings of this study would involve the proposition of an implementation framework for transformative cycling experiences within a designated region, followed by the evaluation of its execution. This framework can be devised by either integrating and emphasising transformative elements, such as self-reflection and personal growth, into the cycling landscape or advancing it even more by drawing insights from established theories, including Mezirow’s transformative learning theory [30], the famous Campbell’s Hero’s Journey [29], and other relevant frameworks such as the model for designing tourism experiences for inner transformation of the individuals [24], strategy framework for tourism practitioners [133] tourist transformation model [134], model of TT learning [135], transformative leadership [122], retrieving ideas about transformational tourism marketing [136] or even following the lines of tourists’ personality change scale after experiencing transformative travel experiences [137].

The identification of prospective regions for future research could be initiated by focusing on established CT areas, which exhibit shared characteristics with TT, in order to facilitate a gradual integration of transformative initiatives by capitalising on existing knowledge and experiences within these well-developed tourist zones. Additionally, the involvement of local stakeholders and the presence of experienced local authorities and facilitators in the field of CT further streamline the incorporation of transformative elements within the targeted region.

5.2. Practical Recommendations for Tourism Practitioners and Policymakers

The mutual and complementary nature between the two typologies may bring additional value in merging transformative experiences with cycling tourism, as the experience can be observed from multiple angles by experts and facilitators in both fields, thus potentially maximising the benefits on the one hand and minimising the possible drawbacks on the other, further aiding tourism facilitators as well as destination managers in the development and promotion of such tourism experiences. An aspect that necessitates mention pertains to the strategies and measures that facilitators and policymakers have to implement in order to foster transformative cycling experiences, taking into account their shared attributes, as staging transformative encounters is considered to be an important step in order for transformation to succeed [133]. On the tourist’s side, the transformation could be facilitated by preparing the tourists both physically (regular cycling training and exercise to build endurance) and mentally (readiness for seeking self-discovery, connecting with nature, and challenging personal limits) before the trip.

Considering the fact that transformation affects not only tourists but also the local community [138] and the surrounding environment, including the residential areas of tourists after the transformation, it is imperative to take into account the perspectives of the local community regarding this phenomenon prior to and during the implementation of such typologies that provide significant transformations in both local communities and tourists. As the nature of transformative experiences thrives on the element of co-creation, local community engagement in tourism development planning is much required as it can become a key element for creating authentic and traditional (even transformative) experiences. These interactions could unfold by participating in local workshops or programs led by the community or even by creating a safe space where both parties could exchange perspectives and ideas, leading to an overall high level of cultural understanding.

In order to provide immersive experiences to tourists, planning cycling itineraries or bicycle stops in culturally significant areas could play an important role in learning about local cultures, folklore and traditions. In this way, the local community could take the role of mentors and guides throughout this entire process, helping tourists to reach their transformative experiences by teaching them how to overcome their limits, share authentic experiences, promote self-reflection and encourage them along the way.
Furthermore, these interactions could occur between the cyclists encountered along the way that could end up in broadening one’s mind, challenging fixed assumptions, as well as enriching personal growth through sharing stories, experiences, and ideas in meaningful (yet transformative) conversations.

Awareness of both natural conservation and cultural preservation could be achieved through the organisation of local, sustainable projects in which both tourists and residents can participate, with educational sessions on different thematics, such as sustainable behaviours and regenerative alternatives. Policies promoting cycle lanes are considered a favourable direction [139]; therefore, planners, policymakers, and authorities should consider promoting cycling as it yields beneficial results for health, environment, urban life quality, and, most notably, job opportunities within local communities [140]. Cycling investments can have multiple positive and indirect effects on environmental protection and sustainable economic growth [6,141]. Overall, investments in cycling infrastructure can encourage the development of an environmentally friendly transportation culture by limiting the consumption of natural resources and fostering strong ties with local culture and traditions [12]. Thus, all of the above should be slowly implemented for the success of a destination.

On another note, personal development and shifting perspectives could be facilitated by meaningful encounters with both residents and like-minded tourists, gaining resilience by overcoming obstacles along the way, especially on longer and demanding cycling routes.

Yet, since self-reflection and critical thinking are an important part of transformative tourism experiences, these should be encountered and facilitated in CT experiences as well, allowing tourists to gain new perspectives of the world we live in. In matters of attaining self-reflection and mindfulness, several rest stops in scenic locations, meditation sessions, or guided reflection exercises that allow participants to connect with their inner selves and appreciate the beauty of their surroundings could be integrated during the cycling itinerary. Introspection and reflection could be attained through documenting thoughts and feelings, whether by writing or journaling, meditation, yoga, or talking with friends and family once the individual returns home, incorporating the lessons learned and new perspectives acquired throughout the trip into their daily lives. Another important aspect is post-travel feedback, which aims to prolong or remind travellers of the moment of reflection, either through check-up phone calls or emails provided by facilitators and destination managers post-trip, keeping travel journals, creating artwork, engaging in memory techniques learned during the experience to relive the moment, etc.

Transformative cycling tourism could be seen as a regenerative tourism alternative due to its characteristics related to the environment, social and natural reconnection, activating a sense of belonging to a place, and involvement in group activities. The latter could be enhanced by participating in authentic and artistic activities within the community or even by learning new traditional practices within locally-based workshops. The combination of outdoor activities such as cycling with hiking, charitable and sports events, leisure and cultural tourism, and the implementation of initiatives that showcase areas inhospitable to humans undeniably aligns with the principles of TT. It is expected to have a regenerative and resilient aspect since the inner transformation is reflected in the outer world.

Last but not least, after providing a blueprint for such experiences and starting the implementation in a destination, a regular evaluation of the impact of these experiences should be employed, especially on the socio-economic and environmental aspects, in order to acknowledge areas which require improvements and to seek if these are working properly by mostly resulting in positive outcomes for tourists, residents and the tourism destination.

It is important to acknowledge that even if there are many opportunities that could arise from the development of such transformative experiences in CT, challenges may still be encountered along the way with regard to the residents’ initial perceptions and
designation of such experiences. For example, such implementation requires the readiness of all participants, and a sense of familiarity from previous cycling experiences could help bridge and reduce the initial reluctance to try TT. This reluctance could be based on previous unsuccessful tourist practices, high expectations or failed plans, or even the fear of novelty and the responsibility that comes with greater involvement in these activities. Other challenges may include infrastructure and route design to meet the criteria for cultural and natural immersion, especially since CT heavily relies on adequate infrastructure [6]. Additionally, there are associated traffic risks [142,143] and high seasonality [144] to consider, as well as the level of interaction and collaboration among the involved stakeholders, the community, and their overall engagement.

5.3. Future Research Directions

Even though CT could become a potential candidate in the expansion of the TT realm, considering the common factors specified throughout the study that facilitate the transition to transformative experiences, it must be taken into account that there are various elements or contexts where transformation does not occur. Therefore, the inhibiting factors on TT, as well as CT, should be closely studied.

On the other hand, since TT is still gradually developing in the tourism scene, more attention should be given to the factors that generate the transformation process, such as the ones studied by Zhao & Agyeiwaah (2023) [145], as well as its post-travel maintenance, to serve as a guideline for future implementations. Transformative experiences in CT should also be studied in both recreational and competitive contexts, as the attributes and transformative outcomes can vary from one situation or person to another. A noteworthy detail to keep in mind is the yin-yang nature of TT [38], which can unfold in both positive and negative emotions; therefore, more detailed research on this aspect should be investigated before implementation.

As TT still has a long way to go before it is discovered entirely, there is a need for guidance and expertise to help further maintain and transfer information on the steps to be taken to implement these experiences. In this respect, in addition to the need to find those individuals or organisations that have expertise in this area, there is a need for more research on transformative learning and transformative leadership so that, ultimately, there can be existing models of good praxis to be followed by all those wishing to initiate such transformative experiences in CT.

Considering the similarities and differences, as well as the benefits and opportunities arising from this research, the aim does not revolve around formulating a detailed plan for the development of transformative experiences in CT but providing a conceptual framework on which to potentially develop such experiences. In this way, it opens avenues for easily implementing such experiences due to the common elements established along the way, as well as acknowledging and preventing future challenges that may arise. Thus, whether these will be accepted and adopted or not by the community, tourism organisations or facilitators, and cycling tourists, whether it could become one of their preferences with regards to tourism offers, remains unknown. Some motivations may or may not intersect with TT; thus, within areas where such transformative cycling experiences are desired to be implemented, surveys or interviews on cyclists who engage in these activities should be conducted to determine if the current tourist profile aligns with that of transformative cycling experiences.

Furthermore, individuals who are knowledgeable about and interested in TT but are not predominantly familiar with cycling can also emerge as a typology seeking such experiences, opening ways to future investigations within this area, along with generating new ideas based on already established frameworks, considering the recommendations provided throughout this section.

6. Conclusions
The research was designed in order to fill a knowledge gap on whether transformative experiences could align with cycling tourism by using comparative thematic analysis to highlight potential synergies and shared features between the two concepts. At first glance, the results of the research revealed a number of shared characteristics and complementarities between TT and CT, therefore presenting a beneficial avenue for further studying them together. Common features such as sustainable development, inclination towards regenerative tourism, slow tourism, immersive experiences—whether natural or cultural, general or personal resilience, eudaimonia, personal development, well-being and an almost-mirrored tourist profile have emerged. Based on their synergies, transformative experiences in cycling tourism could, therefore, stand the test of time as the concepts could align together to form a new, complex, immersive and co-created tourism experience on a bicycle that highlights the sustainable, slow, resilient and regenerative nature of the combination of the two. Moreover, these experiences would be described as both mentally and physically stimulating and inclusive as they would be suitable for a wider range of tourists with diverse motivations, from recreational and hedonistic aspects to even life-changing, eudaimonic ones. These elements could further enhance the overall experience in CT, providing complex activities that revolve around promoting sustainable behaviours to enhance cultural understanding, resulting in personal growth and long-lasting transformations, further providing guidance for facilitators and destination managers to create such experiences. Although at times complementary and in need of a higher degree of preparation, it comes to the shared characteristics that highlight the possibility of gradually integrating these dual-mode experiences and, at the same time, keeping the initial reluctance of trying something “new” within the norm. By integrating this dual yet somehow complementary approach, a series of opportunities regarding a better understanding of different areas such as sustainable, slow, and regenerative tourism practices, nature conservation and cultural preservation, community engagement strategies, transformative experiences design, as well as the creation of personal development circumstances may arise. These experiences could serve as a complementary addition to the destination service offerings, formulating a more strategic point of view for the overall improvement of a destination without significant infrastructure changes.

It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this thematic analysis, as despite employing a comprehensive search strategy, the article included only English language articles from the Web of Science Core Collection, with interventions along the way from other sources that have been used to reinforce the ideas specified in the selected articles, yet still having the possibility of missing relevant studies published in other languages or available in alternative databases.

Additionally, the subjective nature of the search terms and the selection process may have impacted the comprehensiveness of the analysis as it might not have captured the entire breadth of the literature on the relationship between TT and CT. This research highlighted the most encountered characteristics throughout the research, such as sustainability, slow tourism, regenerative approaches, personal development, cultural immersion, and nature connection, where other contextual domains might have existed. The study also did not employ analysis software and instead conducted the tasks manually; therefore, it might have resulted in a reviewer bias even if investigator triangulation was applied, especially in the context of interpretation and data analysis that were further transposed into the conceptual map, where subjective perspectives based on the level of our expertise might have occurred. Nevertheless, acknowledging such limitations brings transparency into the entire process whilst highlighting the need for further prospective research in the field of transformative experiences in cycling tourism. Thus, this research should be considered as a first step towards the implementation of such experiences.

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