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# A transformative value co-creation framework: slow food tourism through speciality coffee

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The primary objective of this study is to examine how slow food tourism contributes to the intricate process of co-creating transformative value among speciality coffee tourists in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This study explores service-dominant logic which focuses on value co-creation through consumption and transformative learning theory, which involves disorienting dilemmas and critical reflections. It examined tourist engagement with third-wave cafés, baristas, origin narratives, sensory experiences and local coffee culture.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study employs interpretivist epistemology, adopting a netnographic approach combined with participant observations and interviews to examine how existential authenticity, place and slow food tourism sensibilities influence meaning-making processes and behavioural changes.

**Findings** – This study created a conceptual framework for transformative travel experiences (TTEs) in co-created speciality coffee experiences, outlining the transformational learning process and perceived outcomes for tourists. This study condenses Mezirow’s ten-step model into six key dimensions: disorienting dilemma, self-examination, personalisation, co-creation, transformation and reintegration. Emphasising mindfulness and intentional living, the findings provide insights into enhancing practices in slow food tourism and developing new opportunities for TTEs.

**Originality/value** – This study highlights how slow food tourism fosters mindful consumption, bolsters local service ecosystems and promotes discussions on transformative services and the creation of experiential value.

**Keywords** Value co-creation, Transformative travel experience, Slow food tourism, Speciality coffee

**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

TTEs have the potential to significantly influence tourists and are becoming increasingly popular. Many people feel disconnected in artificially designed systems and fast-paced, device-oriented cultures. However, TTEs offer hope and the potential to reconnect individuals with their surroundings. Reisinger (2013) defines TTEs as delivering “experiences that allow the development of awareness of one’s existence and connection with self and others,” encouraging people to achieve their full potential (p. 27). These experiences are regarded as positive alterations in tourists’ values, perspectives, self-reflection, personal growth, and a heightened affinity with nature and culture (Godovykh and Tasci, 2025).

Transformations are co-created through interactions among tourists, service providers, and their surroundings (Teoh *et al.*, 2021). The artificial nature of staged experiences does not align with modern tourists’ desire for active involvement and engagement with local communities (Grönroos, 2011; Smith, 2015). Cross-cultural engagement can significantly impact transformation (Pung *et al.*, 2020) by fostering human connections that lead to awareness and life-changing experiences (Matteucci *et al.*, 2022). Travelling can enhance self-awareness and encourage deeper inquiries into life’s purposes and values (Sheldon, 2020). Ultimately, transformative travel helps uncover one’s authentic self, leading individuals to seek existential authenticity (Wang, 1999).

In recent decades, speciality coffee has undergone a significant transformation, emphasising high quality and unique flavours as evaluated by certified Q-graders. The third-wave coffee movement has redefined coffee as a cultural and experiential practice, celebrating craftsmanship and transparency (Fischer *et al.*, 2021). This shift reflects tourists’



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desire for meaningful engagement with their food. Vietnam is the world's second-largest coffee producer. HCMC has emerged as a vibrant hub for speciality coffee in Southeast Asia, where cafés blend global coffee trends with local identity, serving as cultural microcosms of authenticity and sustainability.

The ethos of slow food tourism, emphasising locality, quality, and mindful consumption, has emerged as a counterpoint to mass tourism (Dickinson and Lumsdon, 2010). Rooted in the Slow Food Movement, it encourages travellers to view food as a site of learning and connection (Fullagar *et al.*, 2012). Slow tourism is expected to grow as a means for transformational experiences in the post-COVID-19 world (Nandasena *et al.*, 2022). When applied to speciality coffee, it highlights the intersection of craft, culture, and care, fostering a deeper engagement with the material and social aspects of the consumption experience.

This study explores two key perspectives: SDL and TLT. SDL (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) emphasises value co-creation through interactions in service ecosystems, focusing on relationships rather than transactions. In speciality coffee, value emerges from the blend of the barista's skills and the café's atmosphere. TLT (Mezirow, 1991) highlights how experiences can transform perspectives by challenging assumptions and fostering critical reflection. In speciality cafes, themes such as sustainability and craftsmanship can promote more mindful consumption. Together, SDL and TLT provide a framework for understanding how experiential consumption leads to personal and socio-cultural transformation.

TTEs play a crucial role in tourism studies by facilitating perspective shifts that promote self-development and sustainability awareness (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017a, b). Various areas of TTEs have been extensively examined, including adventure travel (Saul and Waterton, 2018), volunteer tourism (Magrizos *et al.*, 2021), pilgrimage tourism (Haller, 2023), and wellness retreats (Chhabra, 2022). This study extends the concept of TTEs to the urban café environment, where transformative moments can occur in everyday settings. Specialty cafés serve as social spaces that encourage reflection and dialogue, potentially leading to existential authenticity and a renewed sense of enchantment with life. This aligns with the goals of slow food tourism, which aims to provide meaningful experiences.

Despite the growing research on coffee tourism and experience design, several gaps remain. First, existing studies often focus on supply-side innovations, such as quality management and branding, while neglecting the experiential and reflective aspects of tourist engagement. Second, the literature on transformative experiences in tourism rarely considers urban everyday settings, like cafés, as potential spaces for transformation. Third, while SDL has highlighted processes of value co-creation, it has seldom been integrated with transformative learning frameworks to explain how and why certain experiences lead to lasting behavioural or attitudinal changes.

The overarching aim of this study is to develop a conceptual framework for transformative value co-creation in speciality coffee tourism, focusing on the lens of slow food experiences. To achieve this, the study pursues the following objectives: (1) To explore how tourists engage with third-wave cafés, baristas, and coffee narratives in HCMC; (2) To identify how these engagements embody the values of slow food tourism, such as mindfulness, authenticity, and locality; (3) To examine how transformative learning processes emerge through reflection, sensory experiences, and dialogue; and (4) To conceptualise the outcomes of transformative value co-creation in speciality coffee experiences.

Employing multi-methods, including participant observation, netnography, and semi-structured interviews, this study provides insights into the unfolding processes of TTEs and the outcomes they yield for participants. This investigation is both timely and significant, addressing the growing demand for authenticity, existential meaning, and personal growth in tourism, while also advancing theoretical and practical knowledge of value co-creation within the context of speciality coffee tourism.

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## Literature review

### *Transformative travel experiences*

TTEs refer to experiences that elicit profound changes in self-concept, attitudes, or lifestyle (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017b). Mezirow emphasises that transformation involves a shift in worldview through the acquisition of new knowledge and the assumption of new roles. While traditionally linked to pilgrimage or nature tourism, recent studies show that transformation can also happen in everyday urban settings when experiences are reflective and authentic (Pung *et al.*, 2020; Soulard *et al.*, 2019). This perspective broadens the scope of TTEs to include slow, localised, and sensory-based tourism forms such as coffee tourism.

Meaningful tourism experiences can lead to significant positive changes categorised as tangible (physical changes or skill gains) or intangible (psychological shifts in beliefs or attitudes) (Fu *et al.*, 2015). Teoh *et al.* (2021) highlighted four outcomes of transformative travel: psychological, physical, social, and knowledge gains, each influencing personal and societal change. The most impactful outcomes often involve *psychological* changes, leading to inner growth, deeper self-understanding, peace, and stronger connections with others and the environment (Coghlan and Weiler, 2018; Müller *et al.*, 2020; Reisinger, 2013). TTEs can lead to *physical* changes, such as the acquisition of new skills, lifestyle changes, and the development of new behavioural habits (Pung *et al.*, 2020; Soulard *et al.*, 2019). TTEs can change individuals' perspectives, making them more open-minded and positively influencing their *social* levels. People may become more compassionate and open to unity, companionship, trust, and intercultural understanding (Godovykh and Tasci, 2025; Sheldon, 2020). Furthermore, TTEs can lead individuals to develop a natural desire to contribute to the well-being of others and to the environment. These experiences also result in gaining new *knowledge* and providing fresh insights into better ways of living or skills that can enhance personal and societal well-being (Pope, 2018). Some scholars view TTEs as empowering local communities and promoting reflection on the responsibilities of both host communities and tourists, thus contributing to sustainable development (Knollenberg *et al.*, 2014; Wolf *et al.*, 2017).

Many studies have examined the psychological outcomes of TTEs, but few have explored the comprehensive dimensions of transformation. This study aims to provide a holistic view by investigating psychological, physical, social, and knowledge aspects that define TTE outcomes (Teoh *et al.*, 2021; Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023). By considering these varied dimensions, it offers a nuanced understanding of how TTEs affect individuals on multiple levels, enhancing our grasp of the transformation's multifaceted nature.

### *Service-dominant logic and value Co-creation*

Value co-creation originates from the SDL framework established by Vargo and Lusch in 2004. The emergence of SDL represents a significant shift in marketing and tourism scholarship, moving away from a goods-dominant logic where value is seen as inherent in tangible products to a perspective where value is co-created through interaction and service exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). SDL asserts that service, defined as the application of competencies for the benefit of others, is the fundamental basis of all economic exchanges. Instead of viewing tourists as passive recipients of value, SDL considers them as active co-creators, whose participation and interpretation contribute to the generation of meaning and value-in-use (Grönroos, 2011).

Co-creation is essential in TTEs, delivering "transformative value" as outlined by Teoh *et al.* (2021). This collaborative process requires resource integration, where service staff use their expertise to create tailored experiences for diverse tourists. According to Soulard *et al.* (2019), their engagement fosters connections and cultural immersion, leading to personal transformation. Tourists also contribute by sharing insights, enhancing the co-creation of value with providers, which helps achieve existential authenticity (Javed and Awan, 2023). An authentic experience is shaped not only by genuine performances but also by curated moments

that influence tourists' perceptions through quality interactions with hosts and their environments. This pursuit of authenticity allows tourists to connect deeply with the world, facilitating personal growth that lasts well beyond their journey (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017a).

SDL emphasises how tourists shape their own experiences through co-created authenticity. In the context of speciality coffee, cafés serve as hybrid spaces where production, consumption, and learning merge, with baristas facilitating experiences by sharing origin stories, which enhances tourist participation (Kwame Opoku *et al.*, 2023). Value arises not only from product quality but also from interactive storytelling and sensory experiences that link tourists to coffee narratives. However, while SDL explains value creation, it does not clarify why some experiences lead to personal transformation or behavioural change; for this, a perspective grounded in TLT is needed.

#### *Transformative learning theory*

As proposed by Mezirow (1991), the concept of transformation is rooted in TLT in education. This theory emphasises personal and professional growth through critical reflection. Mezirow outlined a 10-step transformative learning process, focusing on elements essential for cognitive reorientation and behavioural change. The process often starts with unexpected moments that trigger reflection, referred to as a "disorienting dilemma." These experiences can push individuals out of their comfort zones, leading to a re-evaluation of core values and a significant shift in perspective (Soulard *et al.*, 2019).

TTEs involve internal exploration that enhances self-awareness and prompts reflections on life's purposes (Sheldon, 2020; Soulard *et al.*, 2021). Engaging in new cultures and destinations often leads tourists to reflect on their past, enriching their perspectives (Alahakoon *et al.*, 2021). This transformation often begins with unexpected moments that encourage deep reflection, particularly during challenging activities or immersions in nature, where physical effort and risk-taking play key roles.

Exploration of tourists' TTEs is still underway. Xu *et al.* (2021) noted that the TLT, typically suited for formal education, is difficult to apply in tourism contexts. While research shows that tourism can lead to transformation (e.g. Coghlan and Weiler, 2018; Kirillova *et al.*, 2017a; Müller *et al.*, 2020; Reisinger, 2013), the specific elements of this transformation are often overlooked. This study incorporates Mezirow's (1991) learning dimensions and a ten-step process to better understand learning as both a process and outcome. The ten steps of transformative learning are detailed by Mezirow (1991, p. 22):

- (1) Step 1: Disorienting Dilemma
- (2) Step 2 and 3: Self-Examination and Critical Assessment
- (3) Step 4 and 5: Recognition and Exploration of Roles and Norms
- (4) Step 6: Planning a Course of Action
- (5) Step 7: New Knowledge and Skills
- (6) Step 8: Trying New Roles and Implementing New Skills
- (7) Step 9: Building Competence and Self-confidence
- (8) Step 10: Reintegration into Life

Integrating TLT with SDL enhances understanding of transformative value co-creation in speciality tourism. SDL highlights the mechanisms of value creation, while TLT focuses on the psychological and experiential transformations involved. This integration suggests that value co-creation is a learning-oriented process characterised by reflection and dialogue, resulting in transformative outcomes.

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### *Specialty coffee, a slow food tourism*

Slow tourism originated in Italy in the late 1980s as part of the Slow Food Movement, which emerged in response to the globalisation of food production (Oh *et al.*, 2016). This “slow philosophy” has expanded to include practices such as slow cities and slow travel (Shang *et al.*, 2020). This study focuses on slow food, which promotes local products, community relationships, and authentic regional cuisine (Jung *et al.*, 2015). The rise of slow tourism and slow food consumption reflects a desire for a more mindful way of life, in contrast to fast-paced, consumption-driven lifestyles. It encourages responsible practices that foster sustainability and social well-being (Fusté-Forné and Jamal, 2020).

Specialty coffee exemplifies slow food tourism, with producers involving tourists in their production process (Quintão *et al.*, 2017). Tourists can learn coffee-making techniques and receive personalised orders from baristas who play a key role in promoting coffee connoisseurship (Kwame Opoku *et al.*, 2023). Previous studies have highlighted that factors such as cup colour can affect tourists’ experiences (Soulard *et al.*, 2021). Some tourists undergo taste transformation and become connoisseur consumers. However, little is known about the nature of TTEs in the speciality coffee context and the roles of producers and tourists in the co-creation process. This study utilises SDL and TLT to explore how slow food tourism fosters the value co-creation process, contributing to TTE among speciality coffee tourists.

### **Methodology**

This study explored tourist experiences with speciality coffee and the value of collaboration with producers, employing a qualitative interpretivism approach due to limited existing literature (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Using a case study method, it examined tourist perceptions of HCMC’s speciality coffee scene, known for its rich culture and distinctive flavours, often enhanced with sweetened condensed milk. The recent shift toward speciality coffee tourism reflects tourists’ desire for unique brews, impacting local producers and cultural identity in Vietnam, while highlighting the potential for personal transformation through these experiences.

A multi-method approach was employed in this study, starting with participant observations, followed by netnography and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation enriched the interview data, enabling a nuanced exploration of experiences and perceptions within speciality coffee cultures (Cole, 2005). Netnography, as described by Kozinets (2020), is a qualitative approach that emphasises cultural insights and contextual analysis, using content from tourists, like travel blogs and reviews. Platforms such as TripAdvisor capture tourists’ opinions, which are crucial for assessing image, satisfaction, and loyalty, providing valuable data for academic research (Marine-Roig, 2022).

### *Sampling strategy and participants*

A purposive and criterion-based sampling strategy was adopted to identify information-rich cases (Patton, 2014). Participants were selected based on their active engagement with speciality coffee culture as tourists, baristas, or café owners and their willingness to discuss reflective and experiential aspects of coffee consumption. Twenty-five participants, including 15 tourists (both locals and international visitors), five baristas, and two café owners and three roasters, were selected for their active involvement in speciality coffee culture and their willingness to share their experiences. Ages ranged from 22 to 45, with varied educational and professional backgrounds. Recruitment occurred through café visits, social media, and snowball sampling, representing a diverse interest in third-wave coffee culture and slow food. Participants were informed about the research’s purpose and ethical standards, and consent was obtained verbally and in writing when possible. The demographic details of the participants are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Profile of the participants

Participants	Sex	Age	Nationality
Tourist 1	Female	20–25	Philippine
Tourist 2	Female	20–25	Malaysia
Tourist 3	Female	25–30	Australia
Tourist 4	Female	25–30	Australia
Tourist 5	Male	30–35	France
Tourist 6	Male	20–25	Korea
Tourist 7	Male	20–25	Korea
Tourist 8	Male	30–35	USA
Tourist 9	Male	30–35	USA
Tourist 10	Male	30–35	China
Tourist 11	Male	20–25	Vietnam
Tourist 12	Female	20–25	Vietnam
Tourist 13	Female	30–35	Canada
Tourist 14	Female	30–35	New Zealand
Tourist 15	Male	30–35	Japan
Baristas 1	Female	20–25	Vietnam
Baristas 2	Male	20–25	Vietnam
Baristas 3	Male	20–25	Vietnam
Baristas 4	Female	20–25	Vietnam
Baristas 5	Male	20–25	Vietnam
Café owner and Barista 1	Male	40–45	Vietnam
Café owner 2	Male	40–45	Vietnam
Café owner 3	Male	40–45	Vietnam
Roaster 1	Male	30–35	Vietnam
Roaster 2	Male	30–35	Vietnam

**Source(s):** Author's own work

### *Data collection*

Fieldwork was conducted over three months. I participated in ten speciality coffee activities at three top-rated spots in HCMC voted by tourists on TripAdvisor. I have documented my experiences in detail, focusing on ambience and interactions. I observed a rich co-creation process between service providers and tourists, particularly during coffee tasting sessions and brewing demonstrations. Analysing these interactions provided insights into how shared knowledge, sensory exploration, and communal enjoyment enhance the appreciation of speciality coffee, revealing deeper connections formed within these social settings. Observational data were collected using the checklist provided in [Table 2](#) below.

**Table 2.** Observation checklist

Observation focus	Description	Example indicators
Sensory engagement	How participants interact with coffee aromas, textures, and flavours	Descriptive tasting, sensory note-taking
Storytelling/origin narratives	Communication about coffee provenance and sustainability	Barista storytelling, producer mentions
Authenticity cues	Expressions of sincerity, locality, or craft	Barista storytelling, producer mentions
Social interaction	Engagement between tourists, baristas, and locals	Conversations, group tastings, shared experiences
Learning and reflection	Evidence of critical thinking or value change	Questions, reflective dialogue, post-visit discussions

**Source(s):** Author's own work

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Netnographic data were meticulously collected from TripAdvisor, focusing on three renowned speciality coffee shops in HCMC. All English language reviews were collected within the time window of March 2025 and systematically organised and analysed using Microsoft Excel. A total of 1,059 tourist posts were gathered, providing rich insights into their experiences and preferences at these popular cafés. This comprehensive dataset offers a valuable perspective on speciality coffee scenes in HCMC during this period.

To enhance understanding, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 participants. [Table 3](#) presents a summary of the interview questions that correspond to the research questions. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 min and covered topics such as motivations for visiting speciality cafés, perceptions of authenticity and sustainability, experiences of learning and reflection, and any changes in awareness or behaviour following café encounters. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically. Additionally, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research to document evolving interpretations, emotions, and positionality. This practice helped the researcher remain aware of their influence on the field and promoted methodological transparency. Instrument credibility and data trustworthiness were established through triangulation across data sources, including interviews, observations, and netnographic data.

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### *Data analysis*

After completing the fieldwork, I transcribed the participant notes to capture all details for analysis. The handwritten notes were converted into a structured format for clarity. All TripAdvisor reviews, fieldwork notes, and interview transcripts were imported into NVivo for the qualitative analysis. The coding process followed Kozinets' phases. The first phase is data immersion, in which I read and re-read the data to build an emic (insider) understanding. The next step is open coding, which involves identifying first-order concepts directly from the participants' language, such as "understanding myself" and "heartfelt interactions." The third phase is axial coding, where open codes are clustered into higher-order categories, such as authenticity-seeking, transformative reflection, and outcomes. The final phase was selective coding, which focused on thematic integration. I adopted SDL to analyse how tourists act as value co-creators and how baristas and tourists utilise their resources for integration. TLT explores the ten steps of the transformative learning process ([Mezirow, 1991](#)). The outcomes of the TTEs were categorised into four dimensions: psychological, physical, social, and knowledge. These dimensions were based on the theoretical framework proposed by [Teoh et al. \(2021\)](#).

While content analysis inherently carries a degree of subjectivity, I took proactive steps to mitigate individual bias. I invited a colleague to review the sections of the analysis that exhibited high levels of uncertainty regarding lexical meanings or ambiguity in the emotional tone expressed by individual tourists. Involving another person in the proofreading process not only bolstered the reliability of the findings but also enriched the depth of the analysis by incorporating diverse perspectives. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board, and the study respected confidentiality, informed consent, and participant anonymity with pseudonyms. Digital data were collected from publicly available sources or with permission, and observations in cafés were non-intrusive, with consent obtained for direct interactions. Ethical reflexivity was maintained, recognising my dual role as both observer and participant in the coffee community.

### **Findings**

#### *The process of creating transformative speciality coffee experiences*

The data from semi-structured interviews, netnographic, and observation field notes reveal a six-stage process through which tourists engage in transformative speciality coffee experiences. This process reflects the iterative relationship between TLT ([Mezirow, 1991](#))

**Table 3.** Research questions and corresponding interview questions

Research questions	Interview questions
1. How do tourists engage with third-wave cafés, baristas, and coffee origin narratives in HCMC?	<p><i>Tourists</i> What motivated you to visit speciality or third-wave cafés in HCMC? How did you first hear about these cafés or coffee experiences?</p> <p><i>Baristas</i> What kind of stories or information about coffee origins do you share, and why?</p> <p><i>Café Owners</i> How do you design your café experience to encourage interaction between baristas and customers?</p> <p><i>Roasters</i> How do you collaborate with cafés or baristas to communicate the origin stories of your coffee?</p>
2. How do these engagements embody slow food tourism sensibilities such as mindfulness, authenticity, and locality?	<p><i>Tourists</i> How do you experience “slowness” or mindfulness when visiting cafés in HCMC? In what ways does the atmosphere or service make you feel connected to local culture?</p> <p><i>Baristas</i> What practices or rituals do you associate with authentic or local coffee culture?</p> <p><i>Café Owners</i> How do you encourage mindful, quality-focused experiences among customers and staff?</p> <p><i>Roasters</i> How do you communicate these values to cafés or consumers?</p>
3. What transformative learning processes emerge through sensory, ethical, and reflective interactions?	<p><i>Tourists</i> Can you describe a moment during your coffee experiences that made you think differently about coffee or culture? Have you ever felt challenged or surprised by something you learned about coffee ethics or sustainability?</p> <p><i>Baristas</i> What kinds of questions or discussions with tourists seem to trigger reflection or curiosity?</p> <p><i>Café Owners</i> How do you encourage dialogue or reflection about sustainability and ethical consumption?</p>
4. How do these processes contribute to transformative value co-creation and perceived behavioural change?	<p><i>Tourists</i> Have your coffee experiences in HCMC influenced your attitudes toward local culture or sustainability?</p> <p><i>Baristas</i> How do you perceive your role in co-creating value with tourists during their experiences?</p> <p><i>Café Owners</i> In what ways do you see your café contributing to both economic and experiential value creation?</p>

**Source(s):** Author’s own work

and SDL (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), emphasising how reflection, co-creation, and value exchange generate personal and social transformation.

*Sensory-aesthetic dilemma.* The study suggests that the Disorienting Dilemma, a form of cognitive dissonance described by Mezirow (1991), marks the initial phase where individuals confront challenges to their worldview, prompting them to reevaluate their beliefs. Observations in cafes show that these dilemmas often arise from aesthetic cultural encounters and unexpected sensory experiences. This phase emphasises *instrumental learning* through interactions with thoughtfully designed spaces, featuring elegant wood furnishings and neutral palettes, which promote slower consumption and meaningful connections between tourists and knowledgeable baristas. These baristas act as “coffee educators,” guiding tourists in identifying flavour nuances during cupping sessions and fostering discussions about aroma distinctions. One barista expressed:

I love helping people discover a world of flavours that goes beyond just bitterness! It’s all about finding the sweetness, acidity, and the unique stories behind each origin. (Interview, Barista 2).

This sense of disorientation arises from embodied and emotional experiences rather than purely rational conflicts. Comments from 14 of the 15 tourists interviewed reveal a disorienting dilemma as they recognise that coffee is more than just a daily beverage; it represents local culture and artisanal craftsmanship. One Vietnamese tourist reflected on his newfound understanding:

I had no idea coffee could taste floral. Watching the barista carefully weigh each gram and share the farmer’s story made me pause and reflect. It’s amazing how much we can learn. (Interview, Tourist 7).

*Relational-ethical reflection.* Upon this realisation, tourists begin to reflect on their own consumption habits and ethical responsibilities. This stage aligns with Mezirow’s concept of self-examination and critical reflection, as individuals evaluate their assumptions and the broader implications of their actions. Through storytelling, guided tastings, and meaningful conversations with baristas and owners, tourists ponder their consumption patterns, sustainability values, and ethical choices. The owners prioritise maintaining high-quality standards, offering fair prices, and fostering supportive relationships with farmers to promote collective development. One of the café owners articulated their perspective:

I believe that acknowledging the effort behind our coffee and supporting our partners’ livelihoods is essential for building a more sustainable future for the entire coffee community. (Interview, Café Owner 3)

Tourists cultivate empathy for farmers, baristas, and local communities, gaining a deeper understanding of social and environmental systems. This expands Mezirow’s idea of self-examination to encompass ethical empathy and awareness of interdependence. This is illustrated by the review provided:

I never really thought about where my coffee came from before. Hearing the farmer’s story made me realise how my choices affect their lives and the environment. (Netnography, tourist)

*Narrative co-creation.* The observations revealed that interactive spaces, such as roasting workshops and cupping sessions, foster meaningful dialogue among tourists, baristas, and owners. These exchanges enable participants to co-create narratives and share diverse perspectives, aligning with Mezirow’s idea that discourse is vital for perspective transformation. Individuals express themselves by selecting flavours and brewing techniques, turning coffee drinking into a personal ritual. This personalisation shows principles of *emancipatory learning*, as participants reflect on their taste preferences and gain insights into themselves. One participant noted:

Once I mastered pouring a V60 coffee, I felt a deep connection to the brewing process. It was a sensory experience, and each pour reflected my personal touch. I wasn't just drinking coffee; I was savouring my passion for the craft. (Observation, Tourist)

Tourists not only gain insights into coffee but also into themselves, often sharing their own experiences. Three of the tourist interview participants noted that the sensory similarities between coffee and wine are influenced by the local culture and heritage. One tourist stated:

In cooler regions, fruits take longer to grow, resulting in higher sugar content that ferments into alcohol, making these wines typically stronger. In contrast, warmer regions produce wines that are generally more acidic and have lower alcohol content. (Interview, Tourist 9)

These interactions emphasise the significance of *communicative learning* and co-creation of value, where meaning and satisfaction arise from shared participation and storytelling rather than mere transactional exchanges. Transformation occurs through shared storytelling and emotional resonance, rather than solely through logic and argument.

*Embodied identity reconstruction.* As participants engage in the processes of brewing or storytelling, they assume new roles — transforming from passive tourists into active co-creators of value and meaning. Ten out of 15 tourists interviewed express feelings of empowerment, authenticity, and a sense of belonging as they embrace the slow food principles of mindfulness, respect, and connection.

It's remarkable how the café environment and the narratives shared by the barista have encouraged me to reevaluate my own habits. I now feel a deeper connection to what I consume. (Interview, Tourist 2)

Now, I see myself as part of a larger narrative — not just a drinker but a supporter of local artisans and sustainability. (Interview, Tourist 5)

This aligns with Mezirow's stages of planning and developing new roles and skills as integral to the transformative experience.

*Sustainable lifestyle continuity.* Tourists gain self-awareness and confidence through new experiences, returning to their lives with fresh perspectives, a key aspect of *transformative learning*. As they engage in this mindful practice, preparing coffee evolves from a mundane task into a rewarding ritual that helps them reconnect with themselves. Each step, from grinding beans to pouring artistic designs in milk, turns an everyday beverage into a personal masterpiece, providing a moment of tranquillity amid a hectic day. One tourist shared her experience of change by the given review:

Talk Barista is a great place to learn about the process of coffee making and Latte Art. Furthermore, I have gained valuable experience in making lattes using mindful techniques, which have been very useful in helping me stay calm under pressure at work. Even though I am doing another job, not as a Barista, I can also use this technique to manage my mind. (Netnography, Tourist)

*Social-sensory co-creation platform.* Mezirow's model emphasises individual cognitive reflection as a rational process of questioning one's assumptions. The participant observations show that learning is co-created socially through interactive platforms, sensory workshops, storytelling, and barista exchanges. These environments foster embodied and emotional learning, transcending mere intellectual reflection. Transformation occurs collaboratively among participants, baristas, and producers, expanding the learning experience beyond rational discourse to include embodied, emotional, and collective meaning-making. This can be conceptualised as a Transformative Value Co-Creation framework, where transformation is not only personal but also socially, ethically, and sensorially generated through interactions within the coffee ecosystem.

This study highlights the dynamic processes of TTEs, showing that value co-creation occurs throughout the consumption process, not just at the consumption stage. Many tourists noted positive changes after their experiences, as they integrated them into their daily lives.

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The next section explores how tourists perceive the outcomes of their TTEs, with the aim of understanding co-created TTEs in the speciality coffee context.

### *Transformative travel experience outcomes*

Tourists perceive TTE outcomes through social interactions with baristas in the speciality coffee sector. This study employs the framework by [Teoh et al. \(2021\)](#) to analyse the sub-themes of Physical/Behavioural, Psychological, Social, and Knowledge dimensions, highlighting how each contributes to tourists' overall TTEs in this environment.

*Psychological change.* The findings revealed that psychological transformation is a key experience for tourists, marked by significant mental and emotional shifts. Twelve out of 15 tourists interviewed expressed that interactions with baristas do more than satisfy a thirst for coffee; they deepen appreciation for the craft, leading to increased feelings of happiness and peace. One tourist shared her experience to illustrate these transformative moments.

I had an amazing experience at this coffee shop. The coffee was incredible, and the passionate owner shared insights about the process from farm to cup. The staff was friendly, making us feel more connected to Vietnamese culture. (Interview, Tourist 14)

The findings indicate that speciality coffee tasting is an introspective journey that boosts self-awareness. By engaging their senses, especially through rich aromas, tourists connect deeply with their identities. Savouring each sip helps them recognise their favourite flavour profiles, enhancing their appreciation of the beverage and providing insights into their preferences and desires. This is reflected in the comments below.

I learned to enjoy the blend of smell, taste, and sensation. This helped me understand the essence of awakening, seeing, hearing, and observing myself to love myself better, before seeking the invisible things outside. (Netnography, Tourist)

*Social change.* This social aspect highlights how interactions with baristas create a sense of unity among tourists. This sub-theme explores the formation of social bonds, networking opportunities, and the development of friendships within the coffee shop environment, which can lead to a stronger sense of belonging. One tourist remarked:

Great coffee experience in this place! The store gives you a unique and intimate coffee experience with the baristas, who patiently answer any questions. I highly recommend it when you are in HCMC. (Interview, Tourist 15)

The baristas at the speciality coffee shop warmly greeted tourists, creating a welcoming atmosphere that encouraged meaningful conversations. These interactions helped tourists gain cross-cultural understanding, learn about local traditions, and foster a sense of connection, allowing them to integrate more deeply into the community and appreciate its cultural diversity.

*Physical change.* The netnographic study revealed significant changes in tourist behaviour and well-being resulting from interactions with baristas. Tourists are now exploring various brewing methods, such as pour-over and French press, to enhance their coffee experience. Many are also trying their hand at creating intricate froth designs, often inspired by skilled baristas. One tourist shared their experience of this transformation:

This is the best place in HCM City for real coffee. The owner showcases impressive latte art skills, making it an interesting experience. You can even learn to make coffee yourself, which is why I love this place. (Netnography, Tourist)

The speciality coffee workshop deepened tourists' appreciation of coffee and changed how they perceived and enjoyed it. This experience encourages a more mindful and hands-on

approach to daily life. Some participants shared their journey, explaining how interacting with knowledgeable staff inspired them to learn how to make coffee independently.

This course was excellent; arriving at Talk Barista Cafe brought a sense of peace and mindfulness. It emphasised the techniques for being a barista as well as the mindset and focus needed for both the course and daily life. (Netnography, Tourist)

**Knowledge change.** On-site learning activities, such as speciality coffee tastings, educate tourists about the origins of beans and the importance of sustainability. Understanding these origins is essential for recognising the value and flavour of coffee. This is clearly illustrated in the comments section.

Great coffee experience! I have much respect for what XLIII does for small-scale coffee farmers. The baristas were attentive, and the experience was very informative. (Netnography, Tourist)

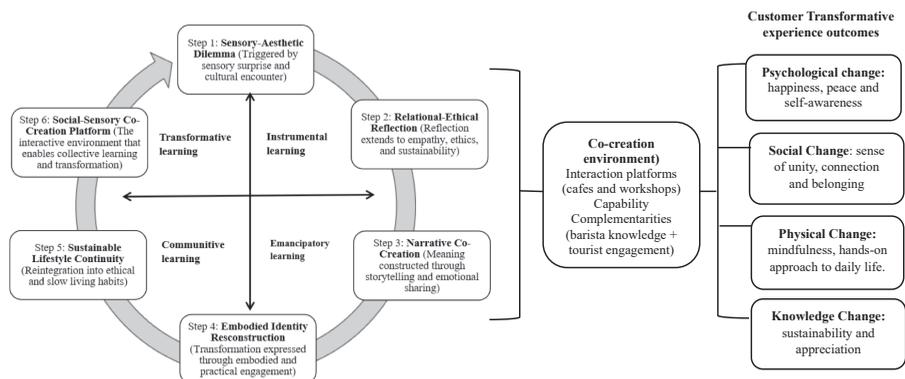
I have not had an experience like this at any specialty coffee place. You get to know the process, the stress on quality, and the sustainable practices they take pride in. (Netnography, Tourist)

Traceability allows tourists to verify information and appreciate ethical practices. Responsible speciality coffee emphasises high taste quality while ensuring social, economic, and environmental responsibility throughout the supply chain, from farm to cup. This approach guarantees a premium flavour experience and positively impacts coffee-producing communities.

### Discussion, theoretical and practical implications

This study developed a new conceptual framework for TTEs within co-created speciality coffee experiences, as shown in Figure 1. This framework emphasises two critical components of TTEs: the holistic process of transformational learning and the outcomes of these experiences as perceived by tourists. This finding suggests that a purely behaviourist perspective of tourists is insufficient, particularly when considering subjective interpretations. This study, which represents a systematic investigation of tourists' experiences, contributes to a deeper understanding of how TTEs are co-created and interpreted by individuals.

Numerous efforts have been made to develop new conceptual models for understanding transformative educational experiences (TTEs); however, these models still require empirical validation (Bueddefeld and Duerden, 2022; Coghlan and Weiler, 2018; Wolf *et al.*, 2017). This study addresses the shortcomings of Mezirow's classical transformative learning framework



**Figure 1.** A transformative value co-creation framework in the speciality tourism. Source: Author's own work

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(1991) and introduces new variables better suited to the distinct context of experiential, co-created, and sensory learning. In this regard, speciality coffee tourism serves as a transformative value co-creation environment, where learning transcends mere internal cognitive processes and becomes a shared, embodied, and ethical journey.

The findings of this study offer a deeper insight into previous tourism research that recognised TTEs but did not adequately explain how specific contextual and environmental factors influence the learning processes leading to perspective transformations (Fu *et al.*, 2015; Pung *et al.*, 2020; Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023). These transformations are considered to be co-created experiences (Teoh *et al.*, 2021). The observational data offered deeper insights into practices, revealing how environmental factors impact value co-creation within physical, social, and organisational contexts, thus enhancing TTEs (John and Supramaniam, 2024).

This study explores the intricate nature of speciality coffee experiences, emphasising heightened awareness over major worldview shifts (Bueddefeld and Duerden, 2022; Kirillova *et al.*, 2017a). It shows how mindfulness during coffee interactions enhances sensory engagement and presence, fostering appreciation in solitary moments and serving as a tool for transformed consciousness. While transformational tourism has been discussed in various contexts (Reisinger, 2013), speciality coffee tourism promotes mindfulness, flow experiences, and mental well-being. These aspects enrich personal connections and encourage growth through meaningful cultural immersion, particularly with skilled baristas. This aligns with Sheldon's (2020) view of tourism as a pathway for personal growth and self-discovery.

While many studies have examined psychological and social changes during immersive experiences (Müller *et al.*, 2020; Pung *et al.*, 2020; Sen and Walter, 2020), this study focuses on the long-term behavioural changes that ensue. These include post-trip reflections that inspire lifestyle adjustments, such as mindful coffee-making techniques to manage stress. Integrating TTEs at home can be difficult due to work pressures (Gill *et al.*, 2019), yet they can significantly enhance well-being and resilience. Additionally, tourists' transformations can positively impact local communities, fostering pro-environmental attitudes among both hosts and tourists (Packer and Ballantyne, 2013). Exploring the speciality coffee industry deepens appreciation for its effects on communities and the environment, emphasising the connection between the coffee we enjoy, its artisans, and the ecosystems supporting it.

### *Theoretical contributions*

Numerous studies have recognised that slow food encourages collaboration between tourists and locals (Huang *et al.*, 2023, 2025). However, many of these studies often overlook the potential for theoretical advancements. This research aims to address that gap by integrating TLT with SDL in the context of slow food tourism in Vietnam. This study contributes to three key areas of scholarship: SDL, TLT, and research on slow food tourism.

The current literature on SDL highlights value co-creation through resource integration but often misses its transformative potential. This transformative value encompasses emotional and ethical dimensions that extend beyond functional outcomes. Transformative learning is an integral part of value-in-use, where reflection occurs among participants during the co-creation process. Analysing the observational data through the SDL lens helped the researcher reveal that the coffee ecosystem in HCMC, with its network of producers, roasters, café owners, and tourists, influences perceptions of authenticity, quality, and sustainability. Service ecosystems evolve not only economically but also ethically and culturally, as participants infuse new interpretations and moral standards into their practices. This perspective enriches SDL by focusing on value creation within the ecosystem and recognising the significance of non-Western contexts in global speciality coffee cultures.

The integration of TLT with SDL represents a novel conceptual contribution. While SDL focuses on relational exchange, TLT offers an understanding of how individuals change their frames of reference through reflection and dialogue. The findings demonstrate that transformative learning can occur within tourist-provider interactions, where critical

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reflection, emotional engagement, and mutual discourse facilitate changes in worldview and behaviour. Through empirical investigation, this study identified six distinct steps in the learning process and proposed a conceptual framework that outlines their relationship. Consequently, a transformative model was developed that is explicitly tailored for speciality coffee tourism. This model builds upon Mezirow's perspective on TLT, offering practitioners in the speciality coffee tourism sector an enhanced conceptual framework to facilitate such learning. This theoretical bridge allows researchers to interpret co-creation as a pedagogical process, turning service encounters into informal learning spaces where transformation unfolds collectively. This study links individual learning to a broader service ecosystem, illustrating how personal changes can precipitate social and cultural transformations.

This research advances the theory of slow food tourism by illustrating that slow coffee tourism encompasses more than merely local products or a leisurely pace; it also incorporates ethical mindfulness and the reconstruction of identity. The concept of "slowness" is redefined to represent a cultural and contemplative rhythm that fosters deeper connections, empathy, and personal transformation. The act of brewing, savouring, and reflecting on coffee becomes a pathway for introspection and personal growth. In this context, the study positions coffee tourism as a microcosm of TTEs, where seemingly minor acts of consumption carry significant social and moral implications. In HCMC, speciality coffee acts as a cultural bridge, linking local identity with global trends and inviting tourists to engage in transformative co-learning. This research offers valuable insights for both practitioners and scholars in the discourse on slow tourism.

#### *Practical implications*

The research findings offer valuable insights for industry professionals, destination managers, and policymakers. The proposed framework is crucial for café owners and tourism entrepreneurs, as it allows for better resource allocation and enhances the speciality coffee experience. Engaging tourists in activities like brewing and storytelling fosters emotional connections and awareness. Baristas should be trained as educators, focusing on communication, sustainability, and cultural mediation. Ethical transparency, such as sharing sourcing information, helps build trust and authenticity. Emphasising local identity and the origins of Vietnamese coffee can foster pride and promote cultural sustainability, transforming cafés into spaces that blend commerce, culture, and consciousness.

Positioning speciality coffee as cultural tourism is essential for destination managers. This involves integrating third-wave cafés into creative city initiatives and slow tourism strategies, connecting them with local heritage and art (Richards and Marques, 2012). Developing "slow coffee routes" can create trails that link urban cafes to coffee farms, facilitating educational visits and storytelling about the journey of coffee. Supporting community capacity-building is crucial, as it encourages collaboration among café owners, farmers, and tourism boards to co-create shared value chains that benefit all parties.

Policymakers should recognise coffee culture as a vital aspect of Vietnam's cultural heritage, driving the nation's creative economy. It is essential to support small-scale, sustainable tourism initiatives that prioritise education, fairness, and ethics over mass tourism. Additionally, promoting training programs in ethical entrepreneurship and practical design can help align tourism with sustainability goals. These strategies may position Vietnam as a regional leader in ethical and transformative food tourism.

#### *Limitations and future research directions*

This study offers valuable insights but has several limitations. It focuses on cafés in HCMC, which may not accurately reflect the coffee culture in rural areas of Vietnam. Future research could compare urban and rural settings or investigate the entire farm-to-cup journey. The sample primarily consisted of young, educated coffee enthusiasts, so broadening the demographic could reveal different perspectives, especially among older generations and local

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residents. Additionally, since the fieldwork captured a specific time frame, longitudinal studies would be better suited to track how reflective practices evolve over time.

This study investigates how speciality coffee experiences enhance tourists' TTEs. Future research should explore value co-creation from the perspectives of tourism providers and examine the long-term impacts of TTEs, including education and interactions with baristas. Additionally, it is essential to examine how tourist transformations impact local communities and develop strategies for sustainable destination development. Broadening the transformative value co-creation framework to other service settings is essential. Lastly, incorporating diverse communities and quantitative methods will strengthen findings and offer deeper insights into transformative value co-creation for individual and community development.

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