

THE SPARK OF MY EYES IN THE CITY: a longitudinal analysis of how longevity perceptions shape existential authenticity, meaning, and loyalty in urban tourism

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Submitted by: Amadeu José Vasconcelos Rodrigues Carvalho, PhD candidate AND Álvaro Dias, PhD, Member teacher, with aggregation to the ISCTE-iul

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Understanding how tourists derive meaning and transformation from travel experiences has become a central concern in contemporary tourism research, particularly in urban contexts characterized by temporal intensity, experiential density, and symbolic richness. While prior studies have extensively examined experiential outcomes such as memorability and satisfaction, limited attention has been paid to the role of tourists' temporal self-perceptions—specifically, how individuals perceive their own aging and future time horizons—in shaping transformative and meaningful travel experiences. Addressing this gap, the present study develops and empirically tests a conceptual model that integrates self-perceptions of aging (SPA) and future time perspective (FTP) as key antecedents of existential authenticity, transformative travel experience (TTE), memorability, and conative loyalty, with meaning of life positioned as both a baseline condition and an outcome reflecting experiential change.

Grounded in lifespan psychology and transformative tourism theory, the model proposes that tourists do not approach travel experiences as blank slates; rather, they carry with them deeply rooted temporal orientations that influence how they interpret, engage with, and internalize their experiences. Individuals with a more limited future time perspective, or more salient awareness of aging, are theorized to prioritize emotionally meaningful and self-relevant experiences, thereby increasing the likelihood of experiencing existential authenticity—defined as a state in which individuals feel true to themselves and deeply connected to their lived experience. This authenticity, in turn, is expected to facilitate transformative travel experiences, characterized by shifts in self-perception, values, or life perspectives. These processes are further hypothesized to enhance the perceived memorability of the experience and strengthen conative loyalty, expressed through intentions to revisit and recommend the destination.

A key contribution of this study lies in its explicit incorporation of meaning of life as a dynamic construct. By measuring meaning of life both prior to and following the travel experience, the study introduces the concept of “meaning gain,” capturing the extent to which tourism experiences contribute to an enhanced sense of purpose and significance. This approach allows for a more rigorous operationalization of transformation, moving beyond static post-experience evaluations to assess actual psychological change.

To empirically test the proposed relationships, the study adopts a prospective two-wave longitudinal design, enabling temporal separation between antecedents and outcomes. Data are collected at two distinct points: at the beginning of the travel experience (T1) and immediately prior to its conclusion (T2), following a pre-post-test structure. At T1, participants report their self-perceptions of aging, future time perspective, and baseline meaning of life. At T2, participants assess their experienced existential authenticity, transformative travel experience, memorability, conative loyalty, and post-experience meaning of life. This design allows for the examination of both direct and indirect effects, as well as the calculation of latent change in meaning.

The study is conducted in an urban tourism context in Portugal, combining one-day city trips and half-day guided tours in Coimbra. These settings provide an ideal empirical context due to their structured temporal boundaries, diverse experiential stimuli, and relevance for both domestic and international tourists. Data collection is implemented using a Unique Identifier Code (UIC) method, which enables the anonymous matching of responses across the two survey waves without collecting personally identifiable information. Participants generate a simple alphanumeric code at T1, which they re-enter at T2, allowing for accurate data integration while ensuring compliance with ethical and data protection standards.

The use of this two-wave design addresses several methodological challenges commonly associated with tourism experience research. First, it mitigates common method bias by temporally separating the measurement of predictor and outcome variables, thereby reducing the risk of inflated relationships due to response consistency or transient affective states. Second, it enhances ecological validity by capturing experiential constructs such as existential authenticity and transformation at the moment they are most salient, minimizing retrospective bias. Third, it enables a more nuanced understanding of transformation through the assessment of change in meaning of life, rather than relying solely on post hoc self-reports.

The proposed conceptual model positions existential authenticity as a central mediating mechanism linking temporal self-perceptions to transformative outcomes. Specifically, SPA and FTP are expected to influence the extent to which tourists engage with the experience in an authentic and self-relevant manner, which in turn drives transformative travel experiences. These transformative experiences are hypothesized to enhance memorability, reflecting the intensity and vividness of the experience as encoded in memory, and to increase conative loyalty, indicating a deeper behavioral commitment to the destination. Additionally, both existential authenticity and transformative experience are expected to contribute to increases in meaning of life, reinforcing the role of tourism as a context for existential reflection and personal growth.

By integrating constructs from lifespan psychology, existential authenticity, and transformative tourism, this study advances the theoretical understanding of how time-related self-perceptions shape the depth and impact of tourism experiences. It responds to recent calls for more psychologically grounded models in tourism research and contributes to the emerging literature on meaningful and transformative travel. Furthermore, by situating the study within an urban context, it extends the applicability of transformative tourism theory beyond traditionally studied settings such as retreats or long-term travel, demonstrating that even short, structured urban experiences can facilitate meaningful psychological change.

From a managerial perspective, the findings are expected to offer actionable insights for destination managers and experience designers. Understanding that tourists differ in their temporal orientations suggests the need for more personalized and meaning-oriented experience design, emphasizing authenticity, reflection, and emotional engagement. Urban destinations, often perceived as fast-paced and consumption-driven, may benefit from incorporating elements that foster deeper connection and self-reflection, thereby enhancing both memorability and loyalty.

In sum, this study proposes and tests a temporally grounded, psychologically informed model of transformative urban tourism, demonstrating how perceptions of aging and future time shape the pathways through which tourists experience authenticity, derive meaning, and form lasting behavioral intentions. By combining a robust conceptual framework with a practical and ethically sound data collection method, the research contributes to both theory and practice in the evolving field of tourism experience and transformation.