**The future of transformative events: An event leaders' perspective**

**Abstract**

**Purpose –** Focussing on the perspective of business event leaders' perspective, this study explores the future of transformative experience (TE) events, recognising a paradigm shift from organising conventional events to designing and guiding transformative experiences in the MICE context.

**Design/methodology/approach –** Using a qualitative interview-based design, insights from 20 international business events industry leaders were gathered and analysed using thematic analysis through a multi-step process with MAXQDA.

**Findings –** The findings discuss the future of transformative events by identifying the paradigm shift towards TE in business events and outline key dimensions of the leader's and team's mindset and skills. Five design principles for TE events in the MICE sector are identified: Design for change; emotionally experiential environments; personal engagement; responsibility; and, transformative measurement.

**Originality/value –** The study adds to the emerging body of knowledge on transformative experiences and contributes to an extended stakeholder perspective, namely that of business event leaders and their teams who are instrumental in facilitating transformative events. An original framework for designing TE MICE events is offered as a theoretical contribution.

**Practical implications –** The study offers a snapshot of how transformative events of the future could be designed and suggests a series of practical insights for MICE event leaders and organisers seeking to leverage events as a catalyst for intentional transformation, positive impact and long-lasting change.

**Keywords:** Transformation economy; experience design; transformative events; business events; MICE.

**Paper type:** Research paper

# 1. Introduction

The events literature has been dominated by the experiential turn, which prioritises customers' memorable and extraordinary experiences (Berridge, 2007; Page and Connell, 2012). Event organisers seek ways to design 'once in a lifetime' experiences that facilitate positive affective outcomes (Lee *et al.*, 2008; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020). Festivals and special events are viewed as immersive liminal spaces (Turner, 1995) in which close social bonds and communities emerge, with positive emotional outcomes that can last far beyond the actual event timeframe (Berridge, 2007; Getz and Page, 2016). Theoretical approaches from environmental psychology and other fields have been used to explain how contextual factors affect attendees' experiences, including the notion of the servicescape (Bitner, 1992), and storytelling, ambience, and theming (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020).

More recently, the transformation economy (Pine, 2020; Pine and Gilmore, 2011) has been gaining traction in tourism and hospitality, prompting event organisers to design events that enable personal growth, self-actualisation, inner fulfilment, wellbeing, and other personal transformation outcomes (Gaggioli, 2016). Studies from the tourism and hospitality context suggest that tourists seek experiences that provide purpose, meaning and personal fulfilment (Pung *et al.*, 2022), while a personal journey to an idealised future self can be intentionally induced by travel and event experiences (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020). Teoh *et al.* (2021) summarise the key conceptual foundations of transformative experience research in tourism. The authors note that most studies are consumer-focused, with the notable exceptions of employee experiences (Pine, 2020), leadership in education (Mezirow, 1997), and tour guiding (Weiler and Black, 2015). There is, however, a dearth of studies that focus on the role of event providers and leaders in facilitating transformative experiences.

This paper aims to fill this gap and to build on the latest work on transformative events (e.g., Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020; Celuch and Neuhofer, 2023), focussing specifically on business events. MICE events represent knowledge exchange ecosystems that afford opportunities for problem-solving, networking, learning, and indeed, personal transformation (Steriopoulos and Wrathall, 2021). We zoom in on business event leaders and the facilitator teams as a hitherto overlooked stakeholder group creating such events. Through interviews with business event leaders, we aim to provide tentative insights into the nature of and the key design principles for transformative experiences in business event contexts, while also exploring the mindsets and skills needed to successfully design and deliver such events.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Business events: from experiences to personal transformations

While no universally accepted definition of business events exists, they have been categorised in terms of the types of events they generally encompass: meetings, incentives, and conferences as exhibitions (MICE) (Rogers, 2013). They represent knowledge exchange ecosystems that afford opportunities for learning, problem-solving, networking, and understanding customers, competitors, and markets (Bathelt and Schuldt, 2010). Objectives differ based on the specific type of business events, but for corporate meetings, for example, these include learning and communication, motivation, decision-making, and networking (Rogers, 2013). Business events increasingly incorporate various digital tools, platforms, and affordances to deliver better return on investment (Davidson *et al.*, 2002). But face-to-face meetings dominate where business objectives exist, including the need to capture participants' attention (e.g., a new product launch); to inspire positive emotional engagement (e.g., energise participants); or to build human relationships and networks (Davidson, 2019).

The business event management literature has mostly focussed on the production, planning, and management of the destination, venue, and hospitality aspects of MICE events (Orefice, 2018). Authors have addressed issues such as factors in site selection (e.g., Jin and Weber, 2016); event attendee and supplier satisfaction (e.g., Bauer *et al.*, 2008); technology in MICE events (Davidson *et al.*, 2002); finance management, impacts, and return on investment (Jones and Li, 2015); and other topics pertinent to an instrumentalist managerial approach (Mair and Weber, 2019; Rogers, 2013).

Nonetheless, an experiential turn has been increasingly evident in the study of business events. Researchers have focussed for example on the multisensory aspects of travel fairs experience design (Sihvonen and Turunen, 2022), or the role of attendees in creating meaning and lasting relationships through social experiences at conferences (Foley *et al.*, 2014). Professional meeting planners also turn to meaningful experiences and their potential to deliver individual transformational outcomes for attendees. As Ogbeide (2019) reports, a recent world congress of the Meeting Professionals International (MPI) association included sessions on experience design and management through 'superhero leadership', and the use of storytelling to facilitate the achievement of organisational objectives.

Steriopoulos and Wrathal (2021) summarise the views of professional event planners on the direction of business events in the post-COVID era. The authors conclude that corporate events need to incorporate meaningful and transformational experiences that emphasise human connectivity and the wellbeing of event stakeholders, while being adaptable and

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flexibly responding to global challenges. The recent ibtm World Trends Report (Turner, 2023) similarly notes that business events will increasingly serve as platforms for corporate brands to build social purpose initiatives that extend beyond the event. The report highlights awareness, wellness, and mindfulness as key trends for business travel in 2023.

Business events can create conditions that bring about positive, transformative experiences for individuals and the collective, and beyond that, help to deliver important societal and organisational impacts. However, there is a dearth of business event studies that explore these opportunities. Therefore, our first research question is: How has the nature of business events experiences changed, and can they respond to the challenges in modern human experiences?

### 2.2. Transformative experiences and the leader's role

To understand how business events facilitate personal transformations, we need to first define transformative experiences. TE can be defined as those extraordinary or unique experiences that intensely and emotionally trigger a person (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017), leaving a lasting and irreversible impact that includes a reassessment of a person's values, beliefs, identity and relationships (Chirico *et al.*, 2022; Gaggioli, 2016). The triggers of such experiences can be spontaneous and often traumatic, but transformations also emerge under specific facilitating conditions and elicitors perceived as novel stimuli that result in a disruption (Chirico *et al.*, 2022). Chirico *et al.* (2022) conceptualise some of these as viewed by different disciplines: transformations can stem from spiritual and mystical experiences, typified by self-transcendence and increased feelings of connectedness as seen in religious and spiritual contexts, dance, prayer, and meditation, but they can also stem from near-death or out-of-body experiences, trauma and chemically induced psychedelic experiences.

TE is typically experienced as an a-ha moment or an epiphany that leads to a personal and epistemological transformation (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017). The individual experiences a radical transformation of their self-world, often finding new meaning in life (Gaggioli, 2016). In the field of psychology, authors refer to 'peak experiences' (Maslow, 1954) as moments of elevated inspiration and enhanced well-being that can permanently affect one's attitude. Gaggioli (2016) highlights the importance of the individual experiencing awe as an emotion that blends a sense of fear with astonishment, admiration, and wonder, often while encountering natural or artistic beauty, exceptional human actions or achievements, or highly unusual or magical scenes, objects or events. Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning points to key features of a transformative environment that needs to be in place for TEs to occur: an individual needs to experience a type of challenging situation that puts into

question their existing assumptions, what Mezirow terms a 'disorienting dilemma'. By actively reflecting on their biases, individuals then change their worldviews.

There is a growing number of TE studies within tourism, hospitality, and events research, with authors adopting different theoretical perspectives to empirically study transformative experiences. For example, Sheldon (2020) discusses deep human and environmental connectivity and opportunities for self-inquiry and engaged contribution as key features of tourism experiences that lead to inner transformation. Bueddefeld and Duerden (2022) build on Mezirow's earlier work and propose a transformative tourism learning model with motivation, assessment of assumptions and exploration of new norms as key TE mediators. Other authors identify triggers of TE (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017), elements of TE in homestays (Inversini *et al.*, 2022), outcomes of TE (Tasci and Godovykh, 2021), and measurement of transformative travel (Soulard *et al.*, 2021). Focussing on the context of festivals and events, Neuhofer *et al.* (2020) propose PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment) dimensions plus liminality as the main features of festival experiences that can lead to personal transformations of event attendees.

While the above perspectives are crucial for understanding TE in tourism and events, they have so far focussed mainly on individuals and their outcomes, as opposed to the role of the provider, event leaders and their teams as key facilitators of TE (Nandasena *et al.*, 2022). Weiler and Black (2015) offer useful insights from tour guiding contexts, noting that tourists look for guides to act as facilitators or brokers of their own meaning-making and transformational journeys towards self-development. The authors suggest that a specific leadership approach is needed to facilitate TE, including active listening, providing space for tourists' creativity and meaning-making, and customising the tour. Sheldon (2020) similarly recognises the importance of developing tourism front-line staff facilitation and communication skills, and highlights that integrating "transformational leadership into tourism firms, and the role of entrepreneurs and employees in facilitating tourist transformation through service touch-points" (2020, p. 10) as crucial topics for further study.

As Mezirow (1997) points out, the role of the educator (or manager; leader), who acts as intermediary, facilitator, and provocateur and who encourages individuals to become critically reflective of their own assumptions, is crucial. This has implications for tourism and events managers and leaders wishing to intentionally facilitate experiences with transformative potential. Previous studies suggest that the design and management of TE require specific leadership skills and may have human resource implications. Therefore, our second research question is: How important is the role of the leaders and their teams in

facilitating TE and what are their key leadership styles, mindsets and skill sets that enable effective facilitation of TE?

## 2.3. Event design for transformative experiences

The design and facilitation of TE is still a relatively under-explored area, particularly within tourism and events. Sheldon (2020) identifies specific management- and provider-led strategies that can facilitate TE in tourism. For example, when designing experiences for tourists' self-enquiry, tourism providers should design physical spaces that reflect a connection to local cultural traditions. When designing an experience of deep human connectivity, guides and front-line staff with sophisticated communication and life skills and personal experience of transformation are needed. Other strategies include leading through ethical practices and inviting tourists to participate, providing them with a sense of achievement and encouragement. Pung *et al.* (2022) expand on Sheldon's study by offering recommendations for tourism marketers specifically targeting male and female tourists.

The design and facilitation of TE in the context of events have received much less attention, with researchers focussing predominantly on design that facilitates positive, optimal, extraordinary, or memorable experiences. For instance, Berridge's (2007) framework for event experience design encompasses the physical environment, activities and interactions, and sensory, emotional, and learning components. Antchak and Ramsbottom (2020) emphasise the importance of storytelling in event concept design, as well as well-designed spatial, atmospheric, and sensorial event environment that engages attendees on multiple levels. In the context of business events, the notions of gamification (Crowther *et al.*, 2018) and 'festivalization' (Rogers, 2013) have also appeared, with authors discussing how event planners can immerse attendees within the holistic event experience and stimulate emotional and cognitive engagement to achieve memorable outcomes.

New influences from service literature, including the notion of value co-creation, have contributed to a focus on the role of event attendees and other stakeholders in co-creating event experiences and value (see, for example, Liu *et al.*, 2017; Rihova *et al.*, 2018). As a result, stakeholders are viewed as co-creators and co-designers of long-term value, with design as the leading paradigm or strategy that is integrated into different levels of organisational structure, culture, and processes, underpinning all planning and management decisions (Orefice, 2018). The potential of events to influence social processes that have potentially a transformational role is implicit in this stream of literature. For instance, a popular professional event design tool 'Event Canvas' from the Dutch Event Design

Collective (Frissen *et al.*, 2016), as well as the more recent Design to Change publication (Frissen *et al.*, 2021), point to using intentional, systematic, and strategic event design as a way to trigger change in stakeholders. Similarly, the imagineering approach (Kuiper and Smit, 2014) to event design suggests layering different experiences (through performers, décor, catering, and engaged staff), which through the attendee's interpretation and interaction become integrated into their life, resulting in a personal transformation.

Neuhofer *et al.* (2020, 2021) researched the dimensions and design of TE in the context of electronic music festivals and transformational community gatherings such as Burning Man. The authors offer novel insights into how festival environments can be staged and themed to create liminal spaces (Turner, 1995) that elicit attendees' sensory engagement and lead to the emergence of communitas, with transformational outcomes for individual attendees. Similarly, Crowther *et al.*'s (2018) study of business events' potential to deliver entrepreneurial opportunities builds on the notion of playful design as key to transporting event attendees into the liminal event space, facilitating responses such as spontaneity, humour, unpredictability, impulsivity, good cheer, and sociability. The authors demonstrate how a fusion of play and work design leads to attendees experiencing a sense of fulfilment, joy, sociality, and trust (Crowther *et al.*, 2018).

As the above review of literature from psychology, tourism, hospitality, and events shows, a plethora of definitions and elements contributing to one's potential transformation are evident. For this study, we primarily use the term transformative experience and define it as: "an intentionally designed and facilitated event with the goal of personal transformation in mind". Business events research has so far neglected to explicitly address the design for TE, particularly from the perspective of those at the helm of creating and managing such transformations: business event leaders and their teams. Our third research question is therefore: What TE design principles do business event leaders utilise to guide their work?

## 3. Methodology

An exploratory, qualitative interview-based research design rooted in interpretivism (Cresswell and Poth, 2018) was adopted to explore business event leaders' views on the nature of and the key design principles for transformative experiences in MICE contexts. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants at two global B2B professional business events that took place between November 2022 and March 2023 and that were aimed at international event leaders, event organisers, and professional meeting planners. The following criteria were used to select a sample most likely to adequately address the research

questions: a) participants must hold a management or leadership role in the events industry with having work experience in business events on a management or c-suite level and b) having been involved in the organisation of (transformative) business events. Personal first-hand experience was deemed essential to gather expert insights on how events become vehicles for transformation in the future and to gain perspectives on the skills and principles of TE event design.

The final sample of 20 international experts encompassed a wide range of experience in conceptualising, designing, planning, and executing business events - from large-scale international fairs of 10000 attendees to international conferences, transformational incentive travel, and boutique business events for small audiences. They are part of large international communities and organisations, including MPI, IMEX, IBTM, ICCA, Events Industry Council, to name but a few. Out of the 20 experts interviewed in this study, 12 were female and 8 were male, reflecting the higher ratio of women working in the global events industry. An overview of the socio-demographic composition of the sample is shown in Table 1.

*** INSERT TABLE I HERE***

Semi-structured interviews included 16 open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). Initial questions explored the interviewees' backgrounds and asked about specific transformative events they experienced, to check that their role and understanding of transformative experiences adequately reflected the TE conceptualisation adopted in this study (Neuhofer *et al.,* 2021). Further questions were designed to help answer the research questions and corresponded with key theoretical themes from the literature, including the shift towards TE events in MICE contexts (Steriopoulos and Wrathal, 2021), event design and measurement for change (Frissen *et al.,* 2016; Frissen *et al.,* 2021), and leadership mindsets, team and staff roles in business events of the future (Bass and Riggio, 2006; Pine, 2020). Probing and elicitation questions were used to encourage participants to tell a story and be specific about details.

All interviews, conducted face-to-face and lasting 20 minutes on average, were voice-recorded and subsequently manually transcribed verbatim to ensure first familiarisation with the data. A multi-stage coding process was employed in line with qualitative thematic analysis guidelines (Bazeley, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following 1) manual checking and familiarising with the transcripts, 2) two researchers preliminarily coded a small number of interviews using an a priori set of themes that reflected key theoretical topics of enquiry pertinent to the study. The resulting preliminary framework was discussed and revised to

serve as a starting point for a more comprehensive analysis (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). Qualitative analysis software MAXQDA 2022 was then used to 3) code all transcripts into broad themes in line with the analytical framework, which were 4) coded-on to inductively allow for granularities and new categories to emerge. The final themes were obtained through 5) sorting, cleaning, and 6) clustering and re-organising the codes in an emergent structure presented in sections 4.1 - 4.3 below. Consistency was ensured through memo-writing, systematic back-and-forth between the data and analysis, and frequent discussions between the researchers throughout the entire analytical process (Bazeley, 2009).

Guest *et al.* (2006) note that data saturation in qualitative studies with a homogenous sample and clear research questions is often reached after as little as 12 interviews. Indeed, data saturation was achieved, with very few new insights emerging after 15 interviews (i.e. no new codes or themes were being identified). This is in line with other qualitative studies in tourism that analysed pre-determined theoretical constructs and typically reached saturation after 15-20 interviews (e.g., Kirillova *et al.,* 2017; Steriopoulos and Wrathall, 2021). In line with the trustworthiness and confirmability criteria in qualitative research (Cresswell and Poth, 2018), member checks were carried out following analysis to ensure the experts' voices were adequately represented and to rule out bias.

## 4.  Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented in the three sections that follow, with Table 2 summarising the key themes, sub-themes, and frequency of responses coded, together with example quotations from a range of interviewees. The main themes include event leaders' views on 1) the paradigm shift from designing conventional events to TE events of the future, 2) the leaders' mindset and skillset in TE, and 3) the team's mindset and skillset in TE. The last section conceptually integrates key findings in a discussion of future TE events design principles.

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### *4.1. A paradigm shift – From designing conventional events to transformative events*

Interviewees were asked to reflect on how business events have evolved and what are the main differences between leading and organising conventional events versus novel transformative events. The first point is the *shift in focus from the event planner to the event attendees' co-creation.* Conventional events tended to primarily prioritise the message and goals that the organiser wants to convey. In contrast, TE prioritise human-centeredness and

create an immersive experience for attendees. Leaders underline that participants joining global business events are themselves experts in the work they do, and this comes more to the fore. Passive listening and learning models are therefore being substituted for more engaging and transformative settings prioritising active participation, co-creation, and learning.

Second, interviewees note that embodying a transformation mindset means a shift from exclusively focusing on the on-site event experience to *facilitating transformative experiences with long-term impact and connection building*. Unlike conventional events that may be limited to a few hours of passive listening, TE events trigger change, personal insight and deeper levels of transformation that are expected to occur days or months after an event. The core difference of TE thus lies in providing new perspectives at the event, empowering attendees to make an impact in their respective fields and inspiring their personal growth. TE acts as a catalyst for change that helps attendees take their newfound knowledge and make a positive difference in their everyday lives and surroundings.

A third identified difference relates to transformative events requiring a shift towards *measuring value and desired change*. Leaders highlight that while conventional events may have monetary and sales targets, TE events pay attention to the value that participants gain and to measuring how an event reaches the desired and designed transformation. TE measurement is more critical than ever, and leaders suggest building the design around the desired outcome. Measuring TE then involves assessing each stakeholder's perceived value and whether the event successfully achieved to facilitate change in the desired direction.

Fourth, there is a notable shift around TE requiring *extended time and effort in organisation* and design compared to traditional events. TE events involve careful planning, development, and execution to create meaningful, impactful, and potentially life-changing experiences. Compared to event formats that have primarily relied on content delivery (e.g. by keynote speakers) and traditional parallel breakout sessions, TE events involve more open, flexible formats to enable sharing a human connection and to encourage spontaneity and collaborative conversations among attendees. Transformative events are designed to feel more *time-spacious* to allow for serendipitous transformative moments to occur. Importantly, breaks and breathing spaces are intentionally weaved into the fabric of an event to allow time for attendees' personal development and to help integrate their learning journeys. Beyond designing powerful programmes, event leaders and organisers advocate spending more time and effort on designing experiential spaces. They witness an emergence of novel spaces, such as quiet and relaxation rooms, yoga rooms, and fun rooms.

The above findings mirror to some extent the increasingly experiential focus in events literature (e.g., Berridge, 2007; Orefice, 2018), but it is interesting that these developments, which have so far mainly been adopted in festival and special events contexts, are evidenced in business events practice. Leaders agree that business events can be considered positive interventions through an intentional approach, while change is not something that can be prescribed but rather needs to be uncovered and nurtured by the individual attendee. This is somewhat in contrast to event approaches that propose considering the intentional design of specific change triggered by each event (Frissen *et al.*, 2021).

### *4.2. The leaders' role – Leadership mindset and skillset in TE*

Interviewees were asked to identify a leadership mindset and skillset pertaining to leading, designing, and guiding transformative events. First, experts highlight the importance of *mentoring and continuous learning*. This includes mentorship programs, both traditional and reverse mentoring, to help develop leadership skills for TE organisation. Interviewees emphasise the need for open-mindedness, willingness to learn, and most importantly, humility. By not assuming one has all the answers, an event leader leads by example, inspiring their teams and fostering a culture of learning, curiosity, and growth.

The second theme in the interviews reveals the importance of up-to-date *design thinking methods and empathy* during the design process. Leaders need to be able to ideate, prototype, and measure the success of TE, and design for and with stakeholders from the beginning. Leaders note that one of their core responsibilities is to challenge assumptions and push the boundaries of event design, empathically focusing on attendees' needs. High-level event design skills are needed to lead teams effectively, integrating knowledge from different disciplines, and guiding internal and external stakeholders through iterative design processes to develop goal- and transformation-oriented value propositions.

Third, the experts emphasise the need for leaders to embrace *change and innovation*. Event design is an ever-evolving process, requiring leaders to have an adaptable mind and to be open to change. By purposefully challenging their views and working with staff who have different skillsets, knowledge levels, and expertise from various disciplinary fields and backgrounds, event leaders foster innovation and creativity. While potentially desirable for any type of event, this requirement was highlighted for TE experiences to embody the necessary skills to guide attendees seeking transformation.

The fourth identified leadership mindset needed for TE concerns the *practice of mindfulness and conscious leadership*. Leaders shape not only the event itself but also the teams that support them in organising TE. Leaders enable creative and inclusive spaces, agreeing that their responsibility lies in promoting diversity and being fully focussed on the moment in which they find themselves. Professional event design, conscious stakeholder involvement, and a positive, purpose-driven approach contribute to successful leadership within this theme.

Event management studies highlight key management/leadership approaches for experiential events; for instance, Antchak and Ramsbottom (2020) introduce the pragmatic management model that emphasises mentoring, positive stakeholder involvement, active listening, and effective communication and relationship management as the key skills for event leaders. Similarly, tourism research suggests that frontline staff are increasingly required to act as transformative educators equipped with emotional intelligence and self-reflection skills (see Soulard and Lundin, 2023). TE leaders display features that are more in line with transformational leadership perspectives (e.g., Bass and Riggio, 2006), which view the leader as an inspirational role model who creates an intellectually stimulating environment by providing learning opportunities both for attendees and for their teams. Reflective of intellectual stimulation in transformational leadership (Bass and Riggio, 2006), this study identifies a mindset that recognises empathy and positive regard for all stakeholders involved.

### 4.3. The team's role – Team and facilitator mindset and skillset in TE

The analysis of event leaders' views on team member and facilitator skillsets revealed four main themes. The first theme suggests the need for a team with high levels of *adaptability and open-mindedness*. Team members need to be willing to try new things, embrace change, and think creatively. When it comes to on-site event facilitation, leaders value quick on the spot decision-making and flexibility as key skills of their team members. Crucial to the TE design process, being an agent of change requires team members to demonstrate a mindset that promotes transformation. Team members should step outside of their comfort zone and bring curiosity.

Second, TE business events require teams that foster *collaboration and communication*. Collaboration and communication are important for the success of any team, but in the socially and emotionally dense context of TE events, they are particularly vital. The findings emphasise the significance of strong interpersonal skills, including empathy, trust, honesty, and effective communication. Leaders value soft skills and the ability to understand others in a human-centred way, which team members need to possess or be trained for. Critical to the

success of a TE, team members need to effectively collaborate with each other and with all stakeholders, ensuring that everyone is aligned with the same change values, working from the start towards the same objectives and desired direction of change.

Third, interviewees highlight the need for their teams to adopt a *bigger-picture purpose-oriented approach*. This means being solution-focused, willing to take responsibility and having a strategic outlook. Team members are encouraged to reflect on the deeper purpose behind their work, focus on 'their bigger picture', and with that in mind, begin the event design process by designing for purpose and change. Last, leaders need to build teams in which individual team members prioritise their own *personal development and growth*. A first-hand experience of transformation is crucial to be able to guide transformation for others through events. Interviewees note that to better identify novel and relevant content for TE events, team members should be encouraged to engage in personal development activities and continuous learning to stay up to date with advances in their field and other sectors.

The findings pertaining to the role and mindset of TE teams are again reflective of previous literature in that facilitators and frontline staff play a crucial role as brokers of event participants' transformational journeys (Weiler and Black, 2015). Orefice (2018) suggests adopting a practice perspective in exploring how events design contributes to knowledge creation among various stakeholders. Learning practices are also highlighted by our interviewees; although unlike previous studies, we provide new insights into the specific skills and mindsets of event teams required to facilitate TE 'on the ground'.

### *4.4. A futures perspective - Design principles for transformative events*

Based on the study findings, five main TE design principles for future business events can be formulated. First, *design for change* was found to be a major determinant for TE event design. The design process starts with the desired outcome(s) of transformation for the participants. Instead of following conventional MICE management approaches that focus on the delivery of corporate goals, specific messages, and content (Rogers, 2013), TE design puts forth participant transformation goals, followed by the design of meaningful dialogues, co-creation, and experiences to achieve the defined outcome goal (e.g., Frissen *et al.*, 2021). This starts with the role of leaders and their teams in managing intentional design processes centred around understanding the deeper psychological motivations and drivers of both prospective and repeat attendees. Data-informed approaches to inform event design and design thinking to formulate clear value propositions of transformative events will be critical to trigger and follow through with potential transformation (Neuhofer *et al.,* 2021).

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Second, future TE events will be characterised by *design for emotionally experiential environments*. This requires leaders and their teams to learn from and partner with experts from various disciplines to create diverse and inclusive experiential spaces. While festivals already collaborate with a range of creative industries to design elaborate staging elements (e.g., Berridge, 2007; Orefice, 2018; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2021), business events could call on film/theatre scriptwriters, video game designers, TV and other media personalities to enhance design. Moreover, positive psychological design (e.g. Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020) is needed to elicit desired emotions and bring attendees outside of their comfort zone. This could be achieved, for example, by offering innovative and virtual experimentation rooms, thematic networking areas, meditation and chill-out zones, and playful design to create surprise. Moreover, TE leaders and their teams need to tap into the event's macro environment (e.g. the destination). For instance, by inviting local artists and involving the local community, TE events bring authenticity to the event space, ensure inclusivity and diversity, and make a positive impact.

*Design for personal engagement* is identified as the third design principle. At the heart of TE are human connectedness and meaningful connections. Thereby, it is critical to understand one's audience, to differentiate in designs between first-time and repeat attendees, and to create customised experiences, spaces, and mechanisms accordingly. Designers could also carefully craft latest technological resources into TE events; for example, by using technology to personalise event itineraries and create enhanced engagement while not undermining the human connection. For transformation to take effect, holistic design is needed that integrates online and offline components across all event phases in multi-stage and multi-channel environments and creates meaningful connections not only on-site but also through long-lasting follow-up activities (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020).

Fourth, TE are about *design for responsibility*. Future event design requires strategic thinking and stakeholder focus, and beyond that, events have a responsibility to lead with topics that bring positive change. It is about focusing on the larger "why" and having a purpose that transcends immediate business gains. Leaders should take ownership of creating positive impact by bringing long-lasting social change to individuals and their communities. Future business events should focus on topics such as social responsibility, consciousness, mindfulness, sustainability, inclusivity, and diversity, to name but a few (Turner, 2023). This requires leaders to be brave and to provoke change by leading with new topics and new event formats.

Fifth, *design for transformative measurement* is needed to understand the impact of a TE. Measuring the effect of transformative events can be complex and multifaceted, requiring a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, and different measurement periods. The evaluation starts with defining upfront the event's desired outcomes for change, followed by appropriate measurement strategies. For example, social media platforms can be monitored to gather insights about attendee sentiments, engagement, and post-event discussions in the community sphere. Systematic evaluations (e.g., quantitative surveys, focus groups, and one-to-one interviews) can be conducted before, during, and after the TE to allow for change measurement across the attendee journey. As TE require time for integration, longitudinal measurement (i.e., immediately after the event, 3-6 months on, a year, or even years after the event) is needed to capture attendees' emotions, experiences, satisfaction, as well as learning outcomes and behavioural changes, and to reveal the sustained impact of the transformative event. Similar evaluation approaches can be seen in literature measuring the effect of sustainable events on attendees' long-term behaviour (Mair and Laing, 2013).

*** INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE***

Figure 1 summarises the key points discussed above. TE business events of the future can be designed and managed by leaders who support and nurture their teams, and in turn are supported by them. We detail the mindsets and skillsets needed to design and facilitate TE events in MICE contexts and outline the underpinning design principles that may guide the work of event leaders and their teams in the future.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

This study aimed to explore business event leaders' views on the nature of TE in MICE contexts, their role, and the mindset and skills required of them and their teams to effectively facilitate transformative experiences in business events. As such, three main contributions are made to the emerging body of transformative events in the tourism, hospitality, and events sector.

First, the study makes an important theoretical contribution to experience design and human transformation literature that is emerging as a novel and distinct field in tourism, hospitality, and events (e.g., Bueddefeld and Duerden, 2022; Celuch and Neuhofer, 2023; Inversini *et al.*, 2022; Sheldon, 2020; Soulard *et al.*, 2021; Tasci and Godovykh, 2021). Our study goes beyond understanding TE in events (from an attendees' perspective) and suggests business

event designers should focus on change outcomes, emotional experiences, personal engagement, responsible/sustainable objectives, and measurement as the key design principles for transformative events in MICE contexts. While previous studies highlight design principles to elicit memorable on-site experiences in event attendees (Antchak and Ramsbottom, 2020; Berridge, 2007), this study identified leaders' viewpoints on the key changes that set apart TE design from conventional business event management. Expanding on Orefice's (2018) view of event design as a strategy in business events contexts, we have identified the necessary TE design skills required of event leaders and their teams.

Second, this study highlights the perspectives and roles of business event leaders and their teams, thus addressing a gap in the literature on TE that has to date been primarily consumer-focused (e.g., Inversini *et al.*, 2022; Kirillova *et al.*, 2017; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020; Soulard *et al.*, 2021). While event experience leadership and management literature acknowledges the key role of the leader in facilitating successful design (Antchak and Ramsbottom, 2020), we have found that event leaders in the context of TE events benefit from adopting a transformational leadership style (e.g., Bass and Riggio, 2006). They represent a key stakeholder who initiates, leads by example, nurtures, and develops teams, and drives the overall event design from its conception, through execution, to follow-through/evaluation.

Third, the study contributes to a better understanding of the role of business events in the emerging transformation economy (Pine, 2020). Unlike previous TE studies that predominantly looked at festivals experiences (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020), we focus on business events as an important source of personal transformation (Steriopoulos and Wrathall, 2021). This study provides an initial building block for the emerging TE design and management theory in the context of MICE events and demonstrates that business events will increasingly represent a piece of the puzzle that triggers intentional change and positive transformation within individuals and their communities.

### 5.2. Practical implications

The study has several practical implications for the MICE industry. First, practitioner-focused models for event management, such as EMBOK (Event Management Body of Knowledge) do not generally look at the event planning process beyond event implementation and closure. However, given that the key value proposition of TE-based design is creating lasting change rather than delivering information and content, MICE event leaders should also start to consider how the traditional linear outcome-oriented event process could be flipped towards facilitating lasting meaningful connections and long-term personal transformation. Design for

change is the new DNA of the events industry (Frissen *et al.*, 2021) and transformational leaders need to strategise through effective design thinking that prioritises the needs of a range of stakeholders across a much longer time span.

Second, the findings offer leaders self-reflexive insights into their personal development of the required mindset and skillset needed to become a pioneer in the transformation space. Transformation from the leaders' perspective always starts with oneself, and the findings imply that business event leaders need to recruit and train their teams effectively to prepare them to shift away from event management logistics towards designing for change and positive outcomes. Business event design and management job roles need to be redefined to attract multidisciplinary teams of designers, facilitators, and coaches with appropriate skills and capabilities to guide human transformations along the event customer journey.

The above point has implications not only for human resource management in the MICE industry, but also for the training and development of business event professionals and event planners. Event vocational training and educational programmes still tend to focus on the strategic and tactical domains of event administration, design, management, marketing, and operations including risk management (Rogers, 2013). But we suggest that TE-based design and facilitation will require event educators to focus on the development of new capabilities in their curricula, including, but not limited to emotional intelligence and empathy; coaching and mentoring skills; advanced design skills for liminal, affective, and immersive experiences; and advanced measurement and evaluation skills.

### 5.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. While this work has focused on shedding light on MICE events as transformative offers, the interviewed leaders talked about a range of global events and their first-hand experiences in organising them. Future research could adopt a case study approach focusing on an event specifically designed for change to understand how leaders and their teams facilitate the transformative process from conceptualisation to execution. Additionally, despite the qualitative nature of this research and its aim to explore transformational leaders' perspectives on a novel topic, the sample size can be considered a potential limitation. While data saturation has been achieved, future research might follow up with quantitative research that surveys MICE industry leaders on how they design for personal transformation and create impact through change on a large scale.

Future business events work should continue the discourse on event design for personal transformation to understand the wider stakeholder group that brings TE to life. This may

include researching event teams and facilitators who oversee executing, guiding, and co-creating the event for and with participants on the ground. This stakeholder group is closer to attendees on a daily operational basis and understands the more intricate expectations, needs, and challenges that come from guiding individuals through life-changing peak moments and disorienting dilemmas (e.g., Chirico *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, further research is needed to pair the designed outcomes with the impact that a TE event has on an individual. The findings highlight the importance of transformation impact measurement. A longitudinal stakeholder study could be of value to explore an event's desired outcomes from a provider and wider stakeholders' ecosystem perspective, and the factual outcomes that unfold over time from an attendee's perspective. Lastly, positive psychology frameworks (Neuhofer *et al*., 2020) might be used to design MICE events as positive interventions and to test their impact in real-life settings.

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**Table I Socio-demographic information of study sample (Source: Authors)**

| Participant | Nationality | Age | Gender | Job category / level | Highest education |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Italian | 25-29 | Female | Corporate Trainer | Master |
| 2 | Ukraine | 30-34 | Female | Management | Master |
| 3 | Estonia | 40-44 | Female | Management | Master |
| 4 | USA | 60-64 | Female | Senior Management | Bachelor |
| 5 | Denmark | 50-54 | Female | CEO / Director | Bachelor |
| 6 | Austria | 25-29 | Female | Junior Management | Bachelor |
| 7 | Czech Republic | 45-49 | Female | CEO / Director | Master |
| 8 | Germany | 50-54 | Male | CEO / Director | Bachelor |
| 9 | Portugal | 40-44 | Male | Editor in Chief | Master |
| 10 | Ukraine | 30-34 | Female | CEO / Director | Master |
| 11 | Denmark | 50-54 | Male | Management | Master |
| 12 | Denmark | 55-59 | Female | Senior Management | High School |
| 13 | Austria | 25-29 | Female | Management | Master |
| 14 | Italy | 50-54 | Male | CEO / Director | Master |
| 15 | Germany | 60-64 | Male | CEO / Director | Bachelor |
| 16 | Holland | 60-64 | Male | CEO / Director | Master |
| 17 | USA | 50-54 | Female | CEO / Director | Master |
| 18 | Holland | 50-54 | Female | CEO / Director | Master |
| 19 | USA | 50-54 | Male | CEO / Director | Master |
| 20 | USA | 50-54 | Male | CEO / Director | Master |

| Main themes | Sub-themes | No. of responses coded | Example quotes from participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Paradigm shift in events towards TEs* | | *115* | |
| | - TEs focus on active participation and involvement of event attendees in events | 20 | "Attendees nowadays want to engage, they want to have conversations, they want to share their experience." (P4)<br>"[…] the value is really to also provide and express points of views." (P19)<br>"What we are asking ourselves why we are doing this, for whom we are doing this." (P2) |
| | - TEs focus on long-term impact and connection building | 31 | "Events are shifting mainly to be places for networking, making connections, business deals, etc. Not that much like sharing information, this is not the main goal anymore, so this is the biggest shift I see." (P3)<br>"Maybe not even the day after but one month or few days after, if you still have some good connections and if you are making some changes in your life, it means it is transformative." (P1)<br>"I think it's really started me off, I was a student at that point so I went from a student with big ambitions and dreams to actually somebody working or at least interning initially but then working in the industry planning real events by six months later I was organizing my first conference myself for almost a thousand people" (P9)<br>"When I still after very long time think about it and when I talked about it a lot." (P6)<br>"It stays with you for the rest of your life." (P13) |
| | - TEs prioritise measuring value and desired change | 40 | "You design a meeting around it instead of designing a meeting then decide how do you get the outcome […]" (P14)<br>"The transformational event is where you can glean how you measure the education people have from learning, currently conferences are not necessarily doing it right now." (P4)<br>"You do things after those events. […] not just, you know, visited the session and attended […] but you also make some steps to change your event, to change your life sometimes." (P10)<br>"The value is that they can change your behaviour and they can change the way that you do things." (P11) |
| | - TE design and organisation require extended time and effort | 24 | "(It is about) capturing the knowledge in the room, not only from people delivering the meeting." (P14)<br>"People don't want to just be talk to you they want to engage they want to have conversations they want to share their experience." (P4)<br>"Give people new inspiration […], what it means to me is that we have to look at how we design the events and the atmosphere around it." (P12)<br>"[…] a quiet room for people who just need a moment to pause of just being surround by so many people.... Everyone needs (one), so it's really being thoughtful and how they organise the agenda." (P17) |
| *Leaders' mindset and skillset in TE* | | *87* | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | - Importance of mentoring and continuous learning | 12 | "[You as the leaders should ask the right questions, learn, learn, learn, read, read, read, don't be satisfied with one answer, investigate and be really curious." (P20)<br>"Take more responsibility and more leading role in changing the learning experience for the membership, but also its the certification programs." (P16) |
| | - Design thinking and empathy as a skillset | 24 | "First of all, you just need to stand in other people's shoes, […]" (P14)<br>"I don't want to accept mediocre events anymore. Every event has to be designed for the different stakeholders, and with a purpose and with the learning outcomes, specified upfront." (P18) |
| | - Leaders as agents of change and innovation | 14 | "[…] it starts with innovation and creativity, and you have to be able to infuse that to the staff and your leadership." (P4)<br>"We need really to start putting together diverse teams, so we need people working and coming with different backgrounds, not only those who are traditional event organisers" (P8). |
| | - Consciousness and mindfulness as key leadership principles | 37 | "I've been very focused on thought leadership and very super focused on conscious leadership so how am I showing up as a leader in that moment in time with my team members to get the best out of them." (P17)<br>"I think as a leader we need to listen to our team members who are involved in the process and help us create. I think we need to open the door to voices who would never been heard before at the table in the conversation of this and try new things." (P16) |
| *Team's mindset and skillset in TE* | | *51* | |
| | - Need for adaptable and open-minded teams | 18 | "I know it's very difficult to go outside of your comfort zone because we feel vulnerable, but I think this is experimentation and there is no box, we have to just think creatively." (P5)<br>"The mindset need to be willing to try something new first." (P12)<br>"They need a lot of human skills, behavioural, psychology, flexibility are super important to turn things around on site that may not be working. I think that's more important than having the logistical skills." (P11) |
| | - Need for highly communicative and collaborative teams | 13 | "They need all these personal development education or growth trainings, all the soft skills, communication, creativity, flexibility" (P7) |
| | - Need for purpose-oriented teams | 5 | "From a staff perspective, I think people should focus on why they are doing the event and why they are coming." (P1)<br>"I need nice people who have the same values, the same values as me, look in the same directions with me and have really nice professional skills to do it correctly." (P2) |
| | - Need for individual development and growth-oriented teams | 15 | "As soon as you attend the event, it is all about empathy, bringing people together, it's about understanding the mood of people. So, I think empathy is key but at the same time we need digital skills and digital training in order to use the right technology for the right format" (P8) |

**Figure 1 Framework for Designing Transformative Experience MICE Events (Source: Authors)**

**TE MICE EVENTS**
Attendees' participation and co-creation
Long-term impact and connection building
Measuring value and desired change
Extended time and effort in planning

**TE LEADERS**
Mentoring and continuous learning
Design thinking and empathy
Change and innovation
Mindful and conscious leadership

**TE TEAMS**
Adaptability and open-mindedness
Collaboration and communication
Focus on the bigger picture
Personal development and growth

**TE DESIGN PRINCIPLES**
1. Design for change
2. Design for emotionally experiential environments
3. Design for personal engagement
4. Design for responsibility
5. Design for transformative measurement

**Appendix 1: Qualitative Interview Guideline (Source: Authors)**
**The future of transformative events: An event leaders' perspective**

**Warm-up**

1. Please tell me briefly about your role and your organisation in the events industry.
2. What do you see are the biggest changes in events experiences today?    What    experiences do attendees want? What experiences planners organise?

**Own experience of transformative event experiences**

3. What was the (or one of the) most transformative events that you have ever attended and/or organised? What made it so transformative? Probing/elicitation: Please walk me through from start to end how the experience was and made an impact.
4. What impact did that transformative event experience have on you long-term? How did you, your worldview or your behaviour change? Probing/elicitation: Tell a story and be specific about the details.

**Shift from conventional to transformative event experiences**

5. What does a transformative event experience mean to you and how is it different from other conventional event experiences?
6. What's in your opinion the value of attending and organising events that are transformative and potentially life-changing compared to conventional event experiences?
7. How would you know that an event experience was transformative, and how would you measure its success as a leader?

**Designing and organising transformative event experiences**

8. You are a leader in the events industry. How do you use experience design or event design principles on a daily basis to organise events that trigger a long-lasting change / transformation for attendees? Probing/elicitation: Can you give an example of this.
9. What are the key differences when designing transformative experiences in the pre / during / post stages of the customer journey compared to conventional event experiences? Probing/elicitation: Talk me through each stage. Can you give an example?

**Leader and team roles in transformative event experiences**

10. What new approaches does it take to design (organise) and guide (facilitate) a transformative event from a human resource / staff perspective?
11. What are the roles of the leader and organisers to make a transformative event happen?
12. What are the roles of the on-site employees / guides to make a transformative event happen?
13. In your opinion as a leader, what mindset, skillset, and training does an events team need to organise and guide a successful transformative event experience? Probing/elicitation: Be as specific as possible. Can you give an example?

**Outlook into the future of transformative event experiences**

14. Let's take an outlook into the future. How do you see transformative events experiences develop over the next 5-10 years? What will be some key developments in your opinion?
15. When designing transformative experiences in the future, what are the most important considerations in your opinion that leaders need to start doing?
16. Final question: Is there anything else that you would like to add, maybe something that I did not ask about but you feel is important and would like to add?