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CAN LEISURE ACTIVITIES BE TRANSFORMATIVE? THE ROLE OF CSR PRACTICES IN SPA TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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Abstract

Tourism, as one of the fastest-growing global industries, places increasing pressure on natural resources and local communities, highlighting the need for sustainable and socially responsible practices. Spa destinations, which depend on natural healing resources, environmental quality, and preserved local contexts, are particularly relevant settings for integrating sustainability into tourist experiences. When supported by CSR practices, spa tourism may not only contribute to reducing negative environmental and social impacts, but also encourage positive shifts in tourists' attitudes, awareness, and behavior. This paper adopts a literature review approach to explore how CSR practices integrated into spa leisure activities may foster tourists' transformation by enhancing sustainability awareness and encouraging responsible post-trip behavior. The paper conceptualizes spa destinations as settings for sustainability-oriented transformation and identifies mechanisms through which leisure activities can extend their influence beyond health and relaxation services.

Key Words: *spa tourism destinations, corporate social responsibility, leisure activities, transformative tourist experience, sustainability awareness, responsible tourist behavior*

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Introduction

Tourism and hospitality are currently undergoing the so-called “decade of action”, with increasing attention being paid to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the alignment of sectoral growth with environmental protection principles. Within this broader sustainability agenda, tourism and hospitality are increasingly recognized as “drivers of sustainable development” (MacKenzie & Gannon, 2019). Particular emphasis has been placed on developing tourists’ “sustainability intelligence”, understood as their ability to understand, evaluate, and adopt sustainable practices (Pulido-Fernández & Lopez-Sánchez, 2016).

As sustainability has gained prominence, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become increasingly important for organizations over the past two decades (Rehman et al., 2022). In the tourism and hospitality sector, CSR is particularly significant because organizations operate within social, cultural, and natural environments that directly shape the quality and authenticity of tourist experiences. Wang et al. (2021) emphasize the relevance of CSR practices in the spa sector, positioning spa destinations as suitable settings for sustainability-oriented initiatives. In this regard, spa destinations are increasingly expected not only to provide health, relaxation, and wellness services, but also to operate in a socially and environmentally responsible manner, especially given their strong dependence on preserved natural healing resources, environmental quality, and authentic local contexts.

Nature-based tourism destinations, including spas, are also recognized as settings that are particularly well suited to transformative experiences, as natural environments may facilitate reflection, learning, and deeper personal engagement (Pung et al., 2020). More broadly, tourism experiences are increasingly understood as potential drivers of behavioral change, with tourists viewed as “agents” of social transformation (Seeler et al., 2021). From this perspective, CSR practices in spa tourism can serve as experiential drivers that encourage tourists to reflect on sustainability, personal well-being, local culture, and their own consumption behavior. Consequently, such practices may function as mechanisms that enhance transformative experiences and support more responsible post-visit behavior (Sheldon, 2020).

This paper aims to highlight the potential of CSR practices in spa tourism destinations to foster tourists' transformation toward sustainable behavior. It first outlines the importance of responsible operations in spa tourism and presents relevant CSR practices in this context. It then examines how these practices can be integrated into tourist experiences in ways that may contribute to tourists' transformation and long-term responsible behavior.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in spa tourism destinations

According to Su and Swanson (2019), social responsibility refers to the ethical obligation of individuals or organizations to act for the benefit of society as a whole; in a business context, this is conceptualized as corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR can be described as a set of practices and activities through which businesses seek to generate positive impacts on society and the environment (Su & Swanson, 2019).

Increasing consumer awareness of the environmental and social impacts of business activities has encouraged spa providers to integrate sustainability and CSR into their operations and strategic decision-making (Dimitrovski et al., 2024). Spa destinations are particularly suitable for the implementation of CSR practices because they are closely connected to natural resources, local communities, and cultural heritage (Pinthong et al., 2026).

CSR practices in spa environments include a broad range of environmental initiatives, such as eco-friendly products and packaging, sustainable procurement, environmentally compatible infrastructure, water- and energy-efficient systems, renewable energy sources, recycling, and pollution reduction (Pinthong et al., 2026). Regulatory frameworks further support destination protection by limiting activities that may threaten environmental and social balance (Szromek, 2021).

Beyond environmental initiatives, CSR in spa tourism also includes organizational and socio-cultural dimensions, such as ethical conduct, accessibility, staff and visitor education, community engagement, and cultural heritage preservation. Spa enterprises can support local development by sourcing regional products, promoting local food and crafts, and organizing fairs and exhibitions, thereby strengthening destination authenticity and socio-economic well-being (Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024). Tourists are also increasingly encouraged to engage in responsible practices, such as purchasing local products, making

donations, planting trees, and observing wildlife, while some destinations involve loyal visitors in CSR planning and monitoring processes (Chilufya et al., 2019). Such participatory approaches enhance both the tourist experience and the potential for long-term sustainable behavior.

Transformative tourist experiences

According to Wade (1998), transformation is “a dynamic, uniquely individualized process of expanding consciousness whereby individuals become critically aware of old and new self-views and choose to integrate these views into a new self-definition” (p. 713). This understanding of transformation has informed the emergence of transformative tourist experiences as a key concept in contemporary tourism research, emphasizing tourism’s potential to stimulate profound changes in attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors (Neuhofer et al., 2020).

Transformative tourist experiences include both intangible changes, such as shifts in attitudes and beliefs, and tangible outcomes, such as the acquisition of new skills, while also fostering social outcomes, including tolerance, trust, altruism, and intercultural understanding (Becker, 2018). Rather than being a primary travel motive, transformation often emerges incidentally through exposure to new environments, cultures, and perspectives (Roberson, 2002). In unfamiliar contexts, tourists gain new insights that may challenge existing beliefs, with transformation occurring when these insights are internalized and applied in everyday life. In this way, tourists may become agents of change, transferring newly acquired perspectives and behaviors into their daily environments after returning home (Seočanac, 2022). Despite the growing body of research in hospitality and tourism, there is still limited understanding of the mechanisms through which CSR initiatives in spa settings influence tourists’ behavior (Basnyat et al., 2025).

Mechanisms of tourists’ sustainability-oriented transformation in spa leisure activities

Kuokkanen and Kirillova (2024) argue that ethically and socially responsibly designed experiences can trigger internal change in guests, enabling them to integrate new insights into their belief systems and encouraging personal growth. Such experiences activate guests’ intuitive sense of responsibility, rather than only rational evaluations of socially responsible practices (Kuokkanen et al., 2026). When socially responsible

practices are embedded in the overall experience, rather than merely communicated as information, guests are more likely to notice and adopt them, creating the basis for long-term changes in personality and behavior (Kuokkanen & Kirillova, 2024).

From a theoretical standpoint, experiences become transformative when they generate new knowledge and understanding that would not be accessible without direct engagement, thereby linking transformation to values, knowledge, and reflection (Pung et al., 2020). This process is reinforced by active participation and co-creation, through which individuals reinterpret experiences and integrate them into existing behavioral patterns (Kirillova et al., 2017). Thus, transformation unfolds gradually: it may begin during the experience, but becomes fully evident through later confirmation and application in real-life contexts after the trip (Kirillova et al., 2017; Pung et al., 2020).

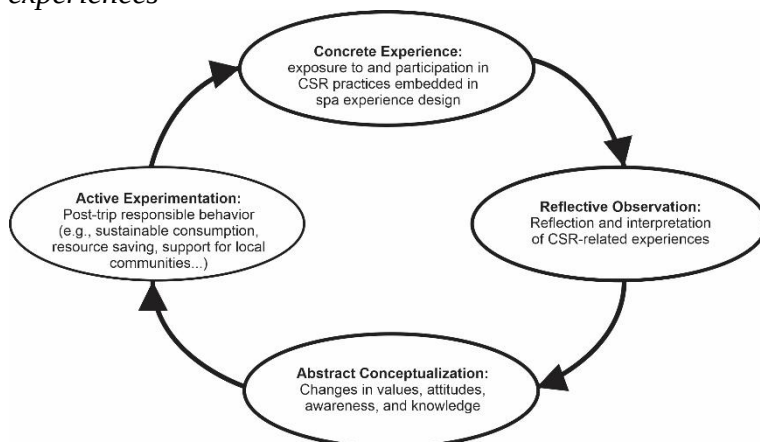
In line with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), CSR practices in spa destinations can be understood as external stimuli (S) that shape tourists' internal states and experiences (O), resulting in changes in values, attitudes, awareness, and knowledge, and ultimately leading to post-trip responsible behavior (R). This process can also be explained through Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1978), which suggests that individuals undergo deep shifts in values, beliefs, and attitudes through critical reflection and the reassessment of previously held assumptions.

Similarly, Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) explains tourists' transformational learning as a cyclical process in which experience leads to reflection, conceptualization, and later application. In spa destinations, CSR practices first shape the concrete experience by exposing tourists to responsible practices. This experience then encourages reflective observation, through which tourists interpret what they have observed. Through abstract conceptualization, they develop changes in values, attitudes, awareness, and knowledge, which may finally be translated into active experimentation through responsible post-trip behavior.

Building on these foundations, CSR in tourism can be linked to experience design, where socially responsible practices are embedded into the tourist experience to move beyond information provision toward meaningful engagement (Kuokkanen & Kirillova, 2024). While traditional CSR communication may have limited influence on behavior,

more immersive approaches that integrate social interaction, shared experiences, and anthropomorphic technologies show greater potential for encouraging sustainable behavior (Kuokkanen et al., 2026). Based on this logic, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of sustainability-oriented transformation through CSR-based spa leisure experiences.

Figure 1: *Sustainability-oriented transformation through CSR-based spa leisure experiences*



Source: Authors, based on Kolb (1984)

Conclusion

This paper has emphasized the potential of CSR practices in spa tourism destinations to foster tourists' transformation toward sustainable behavior. The literature review shows that spa destinations are suitable settings for this process because they depend on preserved natural resources, environmental quality, local culture, and wellness-oriented experiences. These characteristics make them particularly relevant for integrating CSR practices into the tourist experience, since tourists in spa destinations are often directly exposed to natural resources, local products, cultural elements, and practices related to health, relaxation, and well-being.

Practices such as resource efficiency, eco-friendly products, sustainable procurement, cultural heritage preservation, community engagement, staff and visitor education, and the promotion of local products can contribute to destination sustainability. However, their role is not limited to reducing negative impacts or improving destination management. When tourists encounter these practices during their stay, CSR can become part of the tourist experience and may encourage reflection, learning, and changes in

values, attitudes, awareness, and knowledge. In this way, CSR practices can act as external stimuli that shape tourists' internal states and experiences. Through exposure, reflection, and interpretation, tourists may begin to reassess their previous habits and assumptions. These internal changes may then be translated into post-trip responsible behavior, such as more sustainable consumption choices, stronger environmental awareness, or greater support for local communities.

The main contribution of this paper lies in connecting CSR practices in spa tourism with the concept of transformative tourist experiences. Rather than treating CSR only as a business responsibility, the paper positions it as part of experience design and as a potential driver of tourists' post-trip responsible behavior. In this way, spa tourism destinations can contribute not only to sustainable destination development, but also to wider sustainability-oriented change by encouraging tourists to transfer newly acquired values, awareness, and behaviors into their everyday lives and social environments.

Future research should further examine how specific CSR practices in spa destinations influence tourists' transformation and which forms of experience design are most effective in encouraging long-term sustainable behavior. More studies are also needed to explore the relationship between tourists' participation in CSR-related activities, internal transformation, and post-trip behavioral change, especially in different spa tourism contexts.

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