Creative Research Methods for Human-Centred Tourism Futures

Proposed special track for TTRA Europe 2027, Bournemouth University, 30 March to 3 April 2027

Submitted to Professor Dimitrios Buhalis, Conference Overall Chair

Track Chairs

Dr Sanaz Vatankhah, University of Bedfordshire, United Kingdom

Professor Hesam Olya, Sheffield University Management School, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

Dear Prof Buhalis,

We propose a cross-cutting methods track that gives TTRA Europe 2027 a home for research whose main contribution lies in how tourism, hospitality and service phenomena are studied, not only in what is found.

Rationale and relevance to the conference theme

A human-centred Tourism 2040 cannot be built on evidence that leaves out what people find hard to put into words. Tourism experiences unfold through journeys, encounters, bodies, emotions and places, and are increasingly mediated by technology. Much of this is tacit or sensory and is poorly captured by the surveys and verbal interviews that still dominate the field.

Creative research methods offer a way in. Building with LEGO® Serious Play®, photovoice, drawing and collage, walking and mobile interviews, sensory ethnography, collaborative mapping, arts-based and speculative futures methods allow participants to show, make and move rather than only tell (Kara, 2020; Pink, 2015). They also redistribute voice. Residents, frontline workers, Indigenous and rural communities, women entrepreneurs, older and disabled travellers are often the groups that regenerative and inclusive tourism claims to serve, yet they are rarely the authors of the data. Participatory and creative designs make them co-producers of knowledge, which is central to the conference's commitment to ethical governance and inclusive value creation.

The track treats methodological innovation as a means to better theory and better decisions, not as novelty for its own sake (Lê & Schmid, 2022). It is equally interested in how creative data can be analysed rigorously and combined with other evidence, including configurational approaches such as fsQCA and necessary condition analysis, computational and AI-assisted analysis, and experimental designs. This speaks directly to the conference's call for empirically grounded decision-making and interdisciplinary collaboration, and it cuts across the existing tracks on wellbeing, workforce, resilience, regeneration and smart ecosystems rather than competing with them.

Intended audience and scholarly contribution

The track is for researchers in tourism, hospitality, events and wider service research who develop, adapt, combine or critically evaluate methods, and for doctoral and early career researchers designing their first studies. It welcomes empirical, conceptual and methodological papers, research in progress and applied work with destinations, communities and industry partners. Contributions from anthropology, geography, design, psychology, marketing, the creative and cultural industries management and entrepreneurship are particularly welcome.

We expect contributions to do more than report a method in use. Submissions should show what the approach reveals that established methods miss, how its data are analysed and quality is judged, and what it costs in time, skill and ethical risk. The track aims to build a shared vocabulary for rigour in creative research, so that such work is easier to review, fund and publish.

Themes and sub-themes

1. **Creative, visual and arts-based methods.** LEGO® Serious Play®, collage, drawing and model-making; photovoice, photo elicitation and participant-generated imagery; narrative, poetic and performative methods; projective and metaphor elicitation.
2. **Embodied, sensory and mobile methods.** Walking and go-along interviews in destinations and workplaces; sensory ethnography of visitor and service encounters; collaborative and emotional mapping; qualitative accounts combined with eye tracking, wearables and biometric data.
3. **Participatory, co-creative and futures methods for Tourism 2040.** Co-design with residents, workers and communities in regenerative destinations; scenario building, backcasting, design fiction and speculative methods; creative methods with under-represented groups such as women and Indigenous entrepreneurs, older and disabled travellers.
4. **Digital, immersive and AI-enabled methods.** Virtual reality and game-based elicitation; generative AI as creative stimulus, research partner or analytical aid, and its limits; analysing visual, video and user-generated content at scale.
5. **Integrating creative evidence with other designs.** Mixed and multi-method designs; configurational analysis (fsQCA, NCA, and NConfA) of creative and qualitative cases; qualitative and field experiments using creative stimuli.
6. **Rigour, ethics and reflexivity.** Quality criteria and analytical transparency for creative data; consent, anonymity and ownership of images, objects and stories; positionality and power in facilitated methods; training doctoral researchers in creative methods.

Session format and added value

We propose two to three paper sessions, depending on submissions, and one 75-minute hands-on Methods Lab. In the Lab, delegates take part in a short, facilitated LEGO® Serious Play® and visual elicitation exercise, then discuss how the resulting data would be analysed and reported. It could be linked to the Doctoral Colloquium.

Submissions will follow the conference format of a two-page extended abstract. Authors will be asked to state in their method section what their approach adds and how its quality was assured.

We will work with the organisers on routes to publication through the conference's supporting journals.

Track chairs

Dr Sanaz Vatankhah is Senior Lecturer in Business and Management and Deputy Director of Research at the Business and Management Research Institute, University of Bedfordshire. Her research covers inclusive and women's entrepreneurship, tourism and aviation human resources, and the ethics of AI in service industries, published in outlets including Tourism Management and Journal of Business Research. She uses LEGO® Serious Play® and other creative methods with entrepreneurs in the creative industries and is Associate Editor of Education + Training.

Professor Hesam Olya holds the Chair in Cultural and Creative Industries and is Director of Accreditation of the Sheffield University Management School. His work on tourists' behaviour, cultural marketing and digital sustainability is known for applying complexity theory and configurational modelling, including fsQCA, to tourism and hospitality problems (e.g. Olya & Altinay, 2016). He also co-developed NConfA. He edited a special issue on 'Innovative mixed and multi method approaches to hospitality and tourism research', for the International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management.

References

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