



## **The 10 Principles of Burning Man as a catalyst for human transformations**

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Degree Programme in Hospitality, Tourism and Experience Management

Thesis

2024

## Abstract

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<b>Degree</b> Bachelor of Hospitality, Tourism and Experience Management
<b>Report/Thesis Title</b> The 10 Principles of Burning Man as a catalyst for human transformations
<b>Number of pages and appendix pages</b> 47 + 4
<p>Transformative experiences have become an increasing subject of interest as the progression of economic value reaches its next stage, the transformation economy. Rather than a merely passively consumed fabricated experience, people are now looking for authentic experiences that provides meaning and long-lasting changes in their lives. Due to their ineffable nature, what brings about human transformation is still relatively unknown. The objective of this thesis is to investigate Burning Man and its regional events' ability to provide an environment that fosters human transformations. The focus is on the 10 Principles of Burning Man and how they can create this optimal transformative space.</p> <p>The literature review presents previous research on the concepts essential to this thesis. Topics of what makes an experience transformative, what the triggers of transformative experiences can be, and the background Burning Man and its 10 principles are explored in this chapter. The theoretical framework of this thesis proposes a model for an optimal transformative space. The framework is based on various elements gathered from previous experience theories presented in this thesis. It identifies the physical and psychological elements of a transformative space.</p> <p>The thesis used a qualitative approach in its research. The primary research method used was semi-structured interview. The thesis utilised a five-phase process for qualitative data analysis. The main findings concluded that a potential optimal transformative space has a balance of safety creating factors and challenge creating factors. The 10 Principles contribute to creating this balance in the social and physical environments of a burn event. However, the research of this thesis concludes that transformations are not one-size-fits-all, nor are the spaces which foster them.</p> <p>This thesis was conducted over the course of five months.</p>
<b>Key words</b> transformative experience, human transformation, transformative space, Burning Man

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# 1 Introduction

In the landscape of modern society, the pursuit of transformative experiences has become an important point for individuals seeking personal growth, self-discovery, and a profound shift in their perspectives. The phenomenon of transformative experiences has gained significant attention within the broader context of the transformation economy, a paradigm that emphasizes the value placed on experiences that cause personal and epistemic change (Paul 2014). One notable cultural phenomenon that is notorious for embarking transformative experiences is the annual gathering on the Black Rock Desert, Burning Man.

Burning Man, an event that spontaneously came to be in the mid-1980s, has evolved into a global phenomenon, attracting individuals from diverse backgrounds. At the heart of Burning Man are its 10 principles, a set of the community's guiding values that define the event's ethos and contribute to the creation of an environment that fosters personal growth and for many, transformations. This thesis explores the phenomenon of transformative experiences in the context of the liminal festival environment of Burning Man. It examines how the 10 principles can create optimal conditions for human transformations to emerge.

As we delve into the topic of transformative experiences, it is crucial to understand the broader context of the transformation economy that is taking place currently. In a world increasingly characterized by rapid change, the progression of economic value has reached a point in where a simple commodity has been made into an experience. However, now people are looking for more. They no longer simply want an experience but something that leaves long lasting benefits to their life, a transformation. As Pine and Gilmore states in the Experience Economy (1999), once experience economy has come to its end, the transformation economy will take over. The transformation economy posits that individuals are willing to invest in experiences that hold the potential to reshape their identities, values, and perspectives. Thus, this challenges the traditional notions of consumer behavior. Within this space, Burning Man emerges as a unique social experiment, offering a temporary yet profound escape from the constraints of mainstream society. Therefore, it provides a valid context for this thesis to explore human transformations on.

## 1.1 Aims and Objectives

The objective of the thesis is to investigate how the philosophy of the Burning Man community, known as the 10 principles of Burning Man, create an optimal space for human transformations to emerge. The thesis explores the concept of the 10 principles, their influence on the festival environment and transformations of participants. This thesis has one main research question and four sub-questions.

**Main research question:**

*What makes Burning Man and its regional events optimal environments for human transformation?*

**The sub-questions:**

*What is a human transformation?*

*What causes people to transform at Burning Man and its regional events?*

*What is an optimal transformative space like?*

*How do the 10 principles of Burning Man create an environment that fosters transformations?*

**1.2 Justification for the study**

In this emerging transformation economy, we are in a great need for more research on human transformations and transformative experiences. Since Burning Man has been considered one of the most transformative events on Earth, this thesis will explore human transformations through the lens of the Burning Man phenomenon. A study on transformative experiences and social behavior at mass gatherings concludes that secular mass gatherings like Burning Man increase prosocial behavior in participants and leaves many with a long-lasting transformation (Yudkin et al. 2022). Therefore, this thesis is going to further explore the transformative nature of Burning Man and specifically the impact of the 10 principles on the psychological and physical environment of the event. The thesis provides valuable observations for event organizers and experience designers who are aiming to create spaces that foster human transformations. Additionally, it offers an insight to the unique structure of Burning Man and its regional events which can help professionals in the event industry take inspiration from the events' unique structure.

**1.3 Key definitions**

The key concepts relevant to this thesis are explained in this section.

**Burning Man:** According to the Burning Man community (The Burning Man Project, 2024), the community created phenomenon of Burning Man consists of a global network of artists, performers and creators who come together to build a city and an alternative society for a limited amount of time. This liminal space is created upon the values of the community called the 10 Principles of Burning Man. The most well-known and largest gathering this community creates yearly is held on the Black Rock Desert in Nevada but there are regional events organized all over the world.

According to the Burning Man Journal (2023), there were 100 official regional events and many more unofficial events in the year 2023.

**The 10 Principles of Burning Man:** The 10 Principles of Burning Man are the core ethos of the burner community. According to the Burning Man Project (2023), the 10 Principles were originally crafted out in 2004 by the co-founder of burning man, Larry Harvey, as a guideline for newly emerging regional events. The 10 Principles include: radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy. Some of the regional events have additional principles on top of the 10 official principles depending on each community.

**Burn:** When referred to a burn in the Burning Man community, it can either mean the physical burning of a structure which is often executed at the end of each event or the event itself. In this thesis when referred to a burn, it will indicate the event itself.

**Burner:** The participants of Burning Man and its regional events refer to themselves as burners.

**Transformative experience:** As defined in the book *Transformative Experience* (Paul 2014), a transformative experience is an experience that drastically changes an individual in an epistemic and personal way. The epistemic change meaning the individual learns what it is like to have the experience by experiencing it themselves. Personal transformation refers to the change in individual's point of view due to the experience.

#### 1.4 Methodology in brief

The research for the thesis is done with a qualitative approach. This decision is based on the fact that transformative experiences are often ineffable and quantitative data collection methods would not provide the same kind of depth on the topic as qualitative methods. The primary collection method used in this thesis is semi-structured interview since it gives the author as the interviewer to have the flexibility to elaborate on the questions while having a structure to follow which assures that all the necessary questions will be asked. This thesis interviews nine people who have attended at least one burn and experienced a transformation by attending a burn or through being part of the burner community.

#### 1.5 Structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis is the following:

- The literature review which explores related literature on transformative experiences and human transformations, collects the key concepts related to this research and forms a theoretical framework which supports the research.
- The methodology which discusses the research methods used in this thesis, data collection- and analysis process and ethical considerations for this research.
- The findings and analysis which present the main findings of the research and compare them to the theoretical framework formed in the literature review.
- Conclusions and implications which discusses the outcomes of this thesis, the validity of the research and key learnings.
- References which include all the sources used in this thesis.
- Appendices which have all the additional material of this thesis.

## **2 Metamorphosis at the playa – exploring the essence of transformation**

This chapter will delve into the nature of transformative experiences and the background of Burning Man. Firstly, covering how transformations fit in the experience theory. Secondly, defining what transformative experiences are. Thirdly, recapturing the history of Burning Man and its origins. And finally, diving deeper into the ethos of the burner community: the 10 Principles.

### **2.1 From experiences to transformations**

In the realm of consumer behaviour and economic trends, a fundamental shift is occurring from the experience economy to the transformation economy. This transition reflects a growing demand for meaningful, personal growth-oriented encounters rather than mere passive consumption. While experiences are primarily about engaging individuals in memorable events or interactions, transformations are deeper, altering persons perspectives, behaviours, and even their sense of self. The distinction lies in the level of impact: experiences provide fleeting enjoyment, while transformations bring lasting change.

If explored through the lens of memorability, experiences can be analysed through the four realms of an experience, a framework presented in the Harvard Business Review publication, Welcome to the Experience Economy by Pine and Gilmore (1998). The four realms divide experiences into the categories of educational, escapist, aesthetic, and entertainment. An experience can be in one or in all the four categories, in which case the experience hits the so-called sweet spot. Experiences that exist in all four realms are more likely to be memorable than the ones that remain in only one realm. The realms are divided by two axes. The horizontal axis has passive participation on one end, which refers to more consumption-based experiences, and active participation on the other end. The vertical axis consists of absorption and immersion. (Figure 1.)

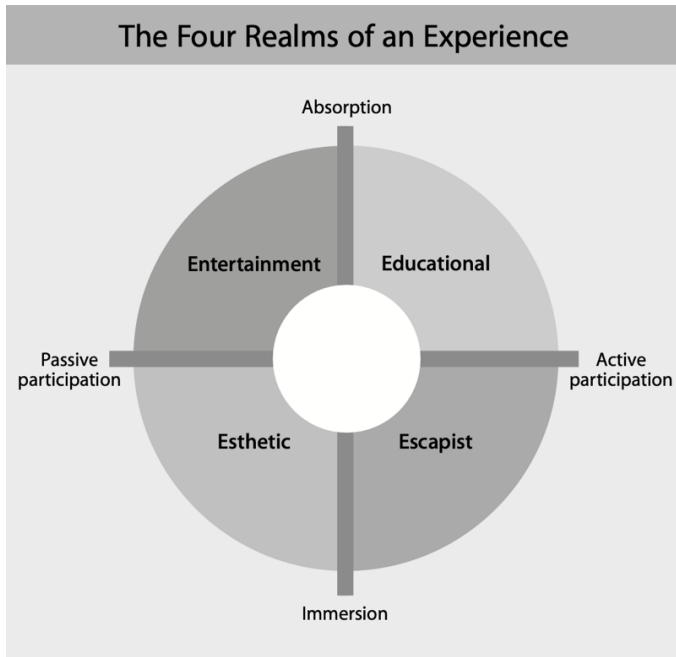


Figure 1. The Four Realms of an Experience (Pine & Gilmore 1998)

This thesis focuses on the escapist and esthetic realms of experience.

Another way of looking at experiences is to examine their meaningfulness. This is showcased in the experience pyramid model of Tarssanen and Kylänen (2006). The pyramid has six elements of experience including individuality, authenticity, story, multi-sensory perception, contrast, and interaction laid out on the horizontal axis. On the vertical axis are the levels that an experience can reach starting from bottom motivational level, then physical level, intellectual level, emotional level and finally at the top of the pyramid the mental level. (Figure 2.) When an experience reaches the mental level, it means that the experience has been sufficiently meaningful to ignite change, thus, transform a person. Therefore, when interpreting experiences through the experience pyramid model it can be acknowledged that transformative experiences have the highest level in meaningfulness.

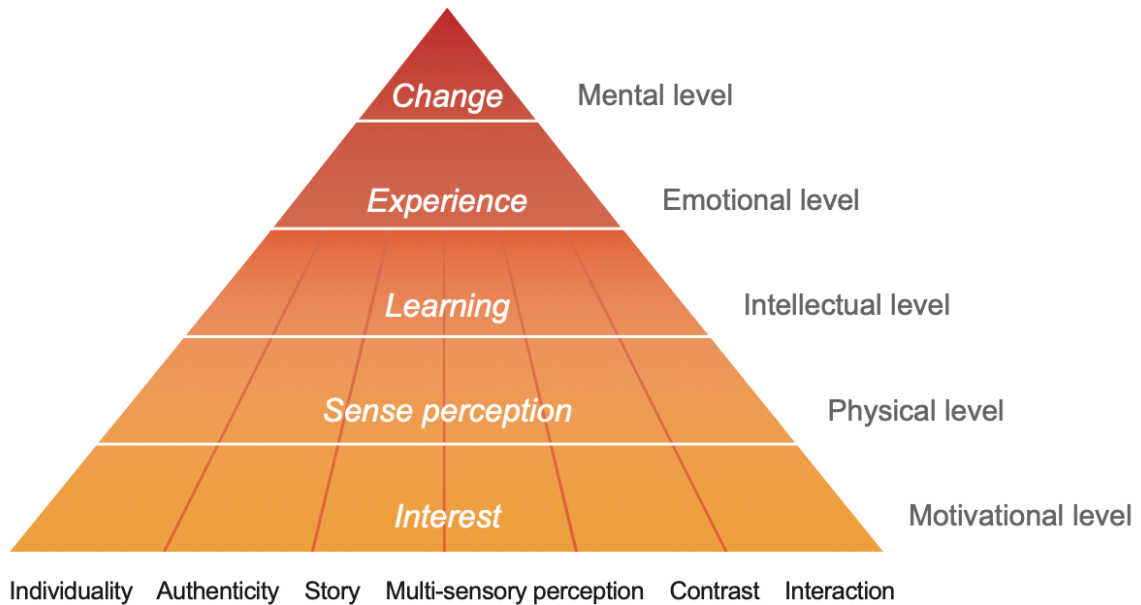


Figure 2. The Experience Pyramid Model (Tarssanen & Kylänen 2006)

This thesis focuses on five of the six elements of experience:

**Individuality**, which refers to the uniqueness of the experience. There are no other products that are precisely or even approximately alike. Individuality is also perceived as a customer-centered approach to presenting the product. Each participant has the opportunity to actualize their own ideas in tackling the tasks involved. (Tarssanen & Kylänen 2006.)

**Authenticity**, in the context of the experience pyramid refers to the credibility of the experience product. It indicates to how near to a real-life experience the product is. Other notable aspects of authenticity are the cultural accuracy, and the motives of the service provider are also strongly linked to the authenticity of the product. (Tarssanen & Kylänen 2006.)

**Multi-sensory perception** relates to the capacity of the experience product to be perceived with as many of the five senses as possible. (Tarssanen & Kylänen 2006.)

**Contrast** indicates to the difference between the experience product and the customer's every-day life and routines. (Tarssanen & Kylänen 2006.)

**Interaction** refers to the relations the customer has to other people in the experience. This includes the relationship with the service provider and with other participants of the experience product. (Tarssanen & Kylänen 2006.)

## 2.2 What is a transformation?

Human transformation is a complex phenomenon that can be hard to measure due to its mysterious and ineffable nature. Often the themes of personal growth, significant life events, spiritual awakening, self-realization, or deliberate efforts to overcome challenges and adversities are related to the topic of transformation. But what is a human transformation and what causes it?

Transformations occur as a consequence when we undergo experiences. But not all experiences lead to transformation, for a transformation to occur we need to undergo specifically a transformative experience. L.A. Paul (2014, 15-18) defines transformative experience by separating it into two types:

An **epistemically transformative** experience in which the only way of knowing what it's like to have experienced it is by living through it yourself. Epistemic transformations are usually related to highly novel experiences such as tasting a food or visiting a place for the first time.

A **personally transformative** experience changes the perception of a person along with their core values and preferences. Personal transformations are tied to experiences which create a fundamental shift in how the individual views life and themselves. This can be through going to a retreat or taking a class at a university.

A transformative experience is both epistemically and personally transformative. In its essence the experience is radically new to the individual creating an epistemic inaccessibility to them while also fundamentally changing who they are after the experience, Paul argues. (2014, 17.) The epistemic inaccessibility refers to the concept that one cannot know what it is like to have lived through the specific experience before having lived through it themselves.

The question of how can one know if they have transformed poses an issue that is essentially subjective. However, if the topic is approached through Paul's definition of transformative experience, it could be argued that a transformed person is one that has attained knowledge that they could not have known before undergoing the experience while also recognizing that their perception, values, and idea of themselves have fundamentally shifted since the experience. Since transformations are initiated by certain experiences, it raises the question can we intentionally initiate them. And if so, how?

### 2.2.1 Triggers of transformative experiences

The preconditions that lead to transformative experiences and ultimately to the transformations of individuals are still relatively unknown. The reason for this is partially the fact that transformative

experiences are by nature difficult to measure. From the perspective of experience design, transformations are increasing in interest for individuals are seeking a deeper meaning and long-lasting effect from experiences. Neuhofer, Celuch and To (2020) introduce a framework which analyses the transformative experience vehicle of festivals. The framework is adapted from positive psychology PERMA model and displays a timeline starting from pre-experience, moving to on-site festival experience, and ending at post-experience (figure 3).

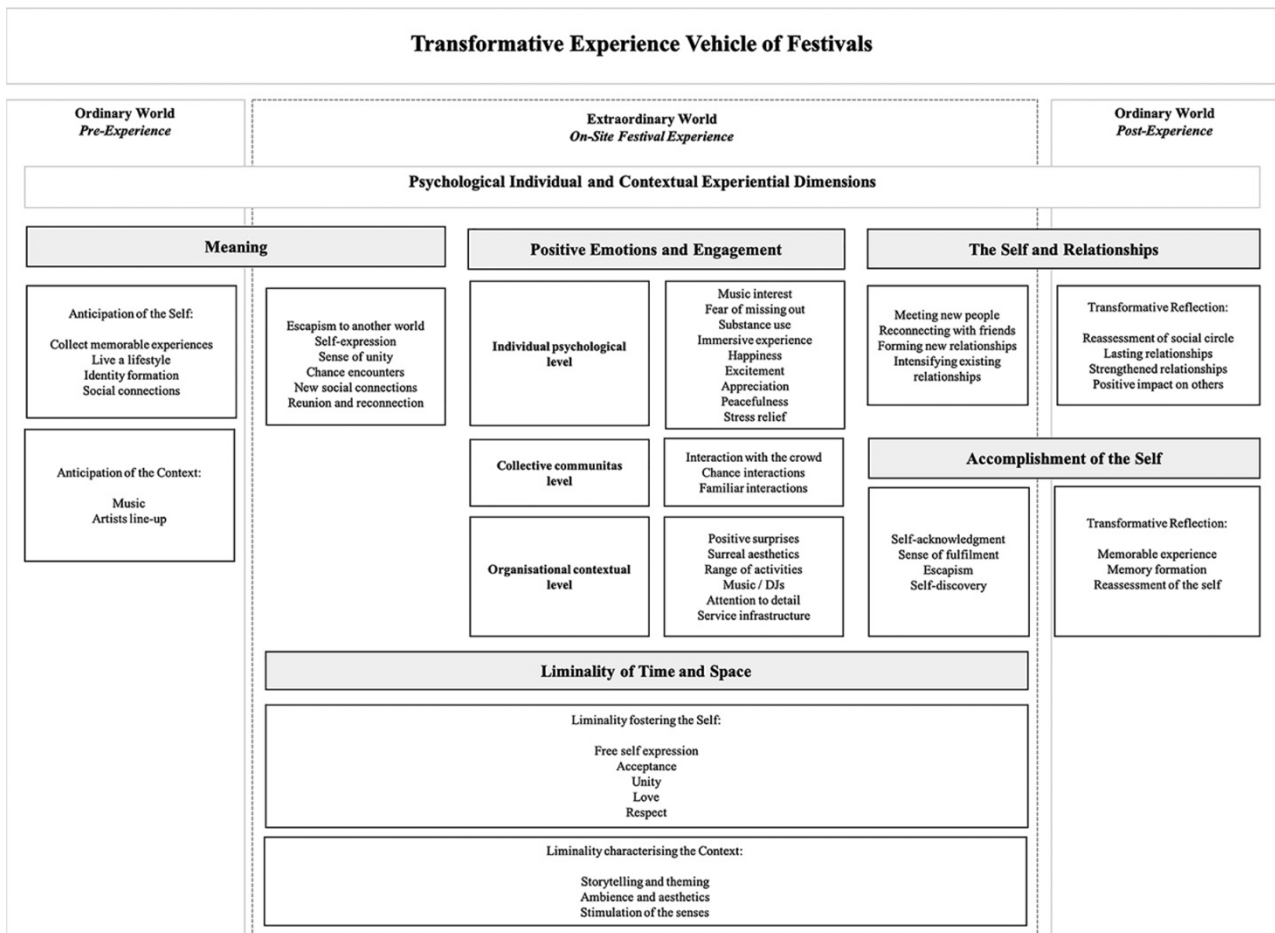


Figure 3. Transformative Experience Vehicle of Festivals (Neuhofer, Celuch & To 2022)

The model suggests that various psychological elements within the individual and environmental factors which can be intentionally designed play a role in transformative quality of an event. The study concludes that although transformations cannot be precisely designed and guided through, the design of the liminal space and the transformation vehicle of pre-, during and post-event can create an optimal space for transformations to emerge.

This thesis utilizes the element of liminality of time and space, specifically on liminality of fostering the self. According to Neuhofer, Celuch and To (2022) this refers to the emotional ambience of the festival space which seems to strengthen liminality and create an alternate reality in which the

sense of time and space changes. Aspects of this element are free self-expression, acceptance, unity, love, and respect.

Burning Man, known for its transformative quality, performs a certain kind transformation vehicle for its participants. Research conducted by Neuhofer, Egger, Yu and Celuch (2021) observes the triggers of transformations in the socio-psychological and socio-environmental space of Burning Man. Collecting Instagram posts under the hashtag #burningman2019, the study maps the participants captions into 27 topics that describe the triggers for transformation before, after and during the event (figure 4).



Figure 4. Composition of socio-psychological triggers (Inner Sphere Topics) and socio-environmental triggers (Outer Sphere Topics) (Neuhofer, Egger, Yu & Celuch 2021)

Ultimately, in the socio-psychological triggers the highest aiming topic was anticipation and repeat visit. A study on the role of expectations in transformative experiences argues that our predictions influence the subjective value of the outcome of the experience. The importance of positive predictions is highlighted to lead to more positive and affective experiences than neutral and negative predictions on the experience. (Villiger 2022.) Following in the socio-psychological triggers come novelty and night-time experiences and gratitude and amazement.

In the socio-environmental triggers the highest scoring topics were art and interactive building, festival area and black rock city and fashion and accessories. (Neuhofer, Egger, Yu & Celuch 2021.) Art is known to have significant value to humans. According to Aumann (2022), art has the ability to transform us. Adopting Paul's definition of transformative experience (Paul 2014), Aumann

(2022) argues that art can be epistemically transformative by allowing us to imagine unknown ways of living while also being personally transformative and direct us to new values and world views. Therefore, the fact that art in Burning Man was experienced as the highest scoring socio-environmental triggers for transformation may not come as a complete surprise.

Based on previous studies it seems that transformations can be initiated through intentional design of the physical and psychological environment of an event. The common consensus concludes that due to the ineffable and highly subjective nature of human transformations, it is not possible to design a transformation per se, but it is possible to create the optimal environment for transformations to organically emerge. This way the experience and the transformation manage to keep its authenticity, while being optimized to happen in the first place. Burning Man entails this authenticity due to its organic, even unintentional beginnings and evolution.

### **2.3 Burning Man as a breeding ground for transformations**

Burning Man, the often praised as transformative co-created event phenomenon, traces its origins back to the year 1986. Two friends, Larry Harvey and Jerry James, built and burned an effigy of a man on a beach in San Francisco. It was a spontaneous event, and it drew people on the beach to observe the burn. Inspired by this experience, Harvey and James decided to recreate the event the following year, inviting people to join them on Baker Beach. Over the years, as the event grew in size and popularity, the event was facing increasing pressure to move location due to safety and environmental concerns from authorities and local residents. (The Burning Man Project 2024).

In 1990, the event relocated to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, where it has been held annually ever since. The move to the desert allowed for greater freedom and creativity, as well as the establishment of principles such as radical self-expression, radical inclusion, decommodification, and communal effort, which have become central to the Burning Man ethos. (The Burning Man Project 2024).

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Burning Man continued to attract a diverse and growing community of participants from around the world. The event evolved into a temporary city known as Black Rock City, with tens of thousands of people coming together to create art, share experiences, and form temporary communities based on principles of radical self-reliance and communal cooperation.

In 1997 Burning Man launched its regional program with the intention of having regional contacts that welcome and orient newcomers to the burner culture, bring people together and endorse community events. Consequently, regional events around the globe started to emerge. In 2023 there were over one hundred official regional events. (The Burning Man Journal 2023).

Throughout the 2010s' and 2020s' Burning Man has exploded in size reaching over seventy thousand participants in the year 2023 (The Burning Man Project 2024). This has brought along challenges regarding financial accessibility and increased commercialization of the event. However, Burning Man has managed to remain a powerful and transformative event for many who attend, serving as a playground for experimentation in art, culture, and community-building.

## 2.4 The 10 Principles of Burning Man explained

All official burns are built upon the 10 Principles of Burning Man. According to the Burning Man Project (2024), the 10 Principles were first formulated in 2004 as guidelines for the newly emerging regional events. The principles reflect the community's ethos and culture as it has naturally progressed over the years. The 10 Principles are the following:

The principle of **radical inclusion**, meaning no discrimination. Everyone from any socio-economic, religious, and ethnic background or is welcome to a burn. There are no prerequisites for joining the community. Burning Man also welcomes families with children. However, according to the Burning Man project (2024), any participant under 18 must be accompanied with a guardian of 21 years old or older in Black Rock City. There has been discussion about can Burning Man remain radically inclusive with its ticket prices reaching up to 575 US dollars in the year 2024 (Burning Man Project 2024). Some of the regional burns such as the Borderland in Sweden have provided a solution for this issue by having low-income membership option for the financially struggling.

The principle of **gifting** encourages participants to give back to the community. There are no expectations of receiving anything back. All gifting is therefore unconditional and decommodified. Gifts can be both tangible like a piece of clothing, meal or an object, and intangible such as giving someone a name, participating in an activity, or simply listening. Many burners have a playa name which is a name gifted to them by another burner that they go by during burn events.

The principle of **decommodification** preserves the culture of gifting. No commercial activities should be encountered at a burn. The goal is to create an alternative social environment which is free from sponsorships, advertisements, or transactions. This principle has been a crucial issue in Burning Man with participants doing brand endorsements and product promotion. In an article on the Burning Man journal (Magister 2023) the problem of commodification is summarized in concrete terms, "There's nothing wrong with money. But there is something wrong when money mediates human connection. There is something wrong when we need a commercial excuse to relate to one another as human beings, and when we let monetization limit our ideas of what's possible". Burners work actively to keep their community decommodified by communicating this value and fighting back in case of any misuse.

The principle of **radical self-reliance** encourages the community to rely on their own resources. This can refer to both internal and external resources. One should not expect to receive resources from others but since the culture of gifting is widely encouraged, resources can be received from others. Many burners choose to join their resources by creating a shared theme camps in which tasks to upkeep the camp is shared between the camp members.

The principle of **radical self-expression** reinforces the individuals to be themselves fully, to use their unique gifts and to express themselves in the way that feels the most authentic to them. This is considered a gift to the community. The gifter, however, is encouraged to respect the rights of the receiver as well. Radical self-expression can be witnessed in burns as extravagant costumes, peculiar behavior and expressing full range of emotions openly among many other things.

The principle of **communal effort** reminds the community to collaborate and cooperate. The burner community strives to create and protect the communal areas, artwork, and communication channels. At its core, the principle of communal effort embodies the idea that everyone contributes to the well-being and success of the community, not just for personal gain but for the benefit of all members.

The principle of **civic responsibility** reinforces the fact that event organizers should take care of the welfare of the participants by providing public welfare and communicating the participants about their civic responsibilities. The event organizers should also communicate the local laws that apply to the event participants during the event.

The principle of **leaving no trace, or shorter LNT**, emphasizes the community's value for nature. The aim is to leave the event site in better condition than what it was before the event. All participants are responsible for recycling and waste management. The participants are also encouraged to collect matter out of place, also known as MOOP, whenever they encounter some.

The principle of **participation** encourages participants to engage with the event. According to the Burning Man Project (2024), they believe that “transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation.” Everyone is encouraged to do tasks and interact with their environment.

The principle of **immediacy** reminds participants to be here now. To experience each moment as it is. The Cambridge Dictionary (2024) defines immediacy as “the fact that something seems real and important, so that you feel involved with it”.

Many regional burns have deployed additional 11<sup>th</sup> principle of **consent**. This refers asking permission on intimacy as well as other aspects such as photography, touch, and gifting. (Burning Man Project 2023).

## 2.5 Author's framework for transformative spaces

Our environment can play a significant role in initiating human transformations. The prior research presented in this thesis has influenced the formation of the following framework for transformative spaces. Table 1 presents all the previous literature, their sources and the focus that were chosen for this framework. The framework aims to demonstrate how the 10 Principles of Burning Man are connected with the elements of transformative space.

Table 1. The structure of the theoretical framework (Kettunen, 2024)

Source	Element	Author's focus
Pine & Gilmore (1998)	The Four Realms of an Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Escapist realm:</li> <li>Immersion</li> <li>Active participation</li> <li>– Esthetic realm</li> </ul>
Tarssanen & Kylänen (2006)	The Experience Pyramid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Multi-sensory perception</li> <li>– Contrast</li> <li>– Individuality</li> <li>– Interaction</li> <li>– Authenticity</li> </ul>
Neuhofer, Celuch & To (2022)	Transformative Experience Vehicle of Festivals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Liminality of fostering the self</li> </ul>
Neuhofer, Egger, Yu & Celuch (2021)	Composition of Inner Sphere Topic and Outer Sphere Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Socio-psychological topics</li> <li>– Socio-environmental topics</li> </ul>
The Burning Man Project (2024)	The 10 Principles of Burning Man	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Radical inclusion</li> <li>– Gifting</li> <li>– Decommodification</li> <li>– Radical self-reliance</li> <li>– Radical self-expression</li> </ul>

Source	Element	Author's focus
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– communal effort</li> <li>– civic responsibility</li> <li>– leave no trace</li> <li>– participation</li> <li>– immediacy</li> </ul>

The following visualization (figure 5) is the author's vision of mapping the 10 Principles of Burning Man to the elements of transformative space. The elements of transformative space have been derived from the models mentioned in table 1. The elements have been divided into features of physical and psychological environment. Each of the 10 Principles of Burning Man appear at least once, while some appear connected to multiple elements of transformative space. The 11<sup>th</sup> unofficial principal consent isn't considered in the framework since the author became aware of its existence only after conducting the semi-structured interviews which were based on the theoretical framework.

## The 10 Principles of Burning Man creating an optimal transformative space

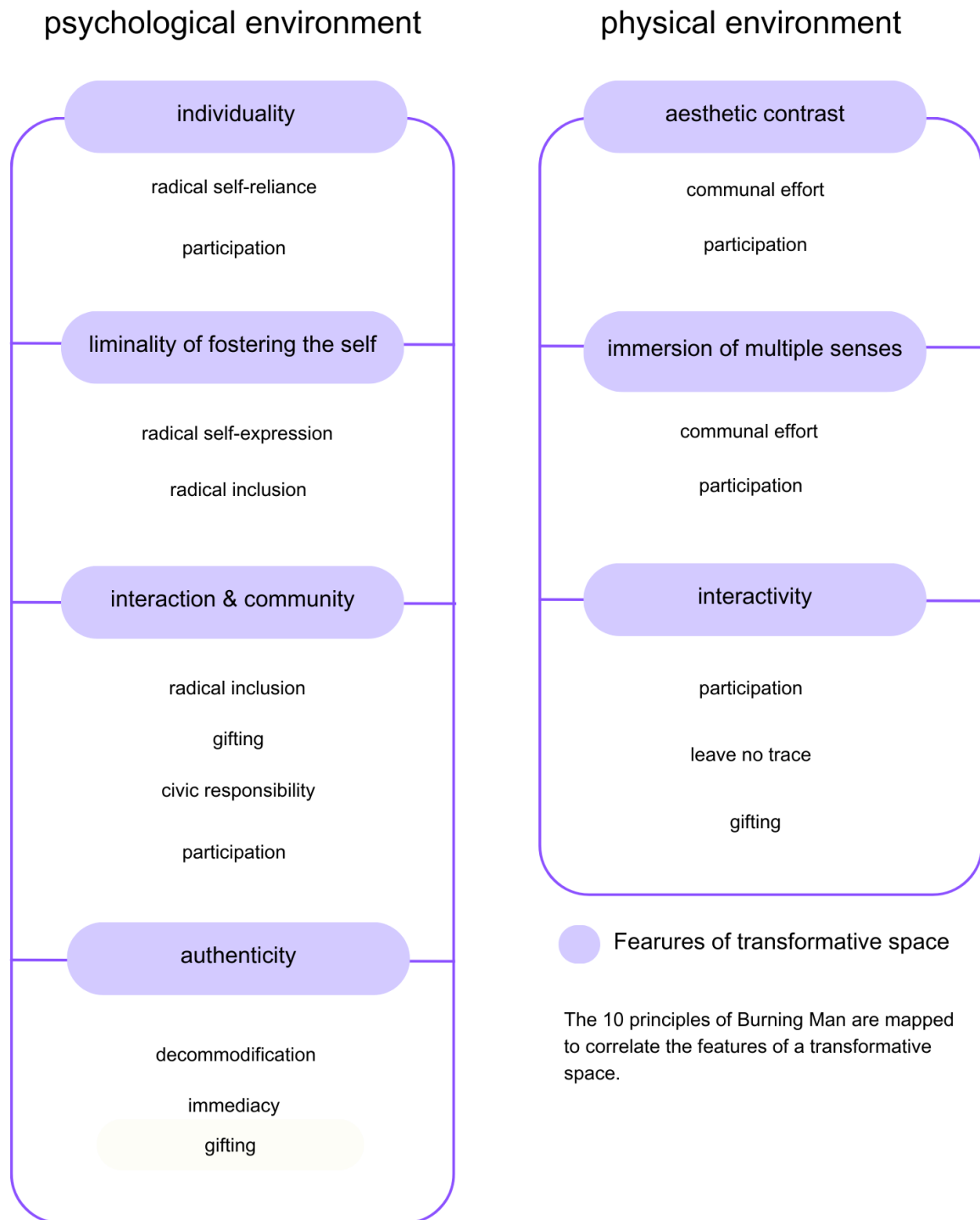


Figure 5. A theoretical framework of the 10 Principles of Burning Man creating an optimal transformative space (Kettunen 2024)

The framework combines certain elements due to their similar nature. Contrast (Tarssanen & Kylänen 2006) and the esthetic realm (Pine & Gilmore 1998) are merged into one as the element of aesthetic contrast. Immersion from the escapist realm (Pine & Gilmore 1998) and multi-sensory perception (Tarssanen & Kylänen 2006) are combined into immersion of multiple senses. Interaction (Tarssanen & Kylänen 2006) has been split into interaction with the physical environment and interaction within the community. (Figure 5.)

In conclusion, this chapter has delved into the intricate relationship between experiences and transformations, exploring the nature and characteristics of transformative experiences and the various triggers that can initiate them. Burning Man as an example of a transformative space has been examined, highlighting, and dissecting its 10 principles providing a deeper understanding of the values and ethos that underline this transformative event. Through this exploration, it becomes evident that transformative experiences are not always mere coincidences but can be intentionally cultivated and nurtured within specific environments or contexts. The following chapter will discuss the methodology of this thesis.

### 3 Methodology

This chapter expands on the research method chosen for this thesis, the justifications for it and how it was applied on this research. Furthermore, it walks the reader through the data collection process and the initial research plan created for the thesis. Finally, the data analysis process and ethical considerations for the research are addressed at the end of this chapter.

The objective of this thesis was to find out how the 10 Principles of Burning Man create an optimal space for transformations to emerge. The previous chapter of the thesis familiarized the reader with preceding research in the field of experience theory and human transformations in the context of liminal festival settings. It further expanded on the history of Burning Man and values of its community, also known as the 10 Principles of Burning Man. Additionally, a theoretical framework for transformative spaces was presented in figure 5 in the previous chapter.

#### **Main research question:**

*What makes Burning Man and its regional events optimal environments for human transformation?*

#### **The sub-questions:**

*What is a human transformation?*

*What causes people to transform at Burning Man and its regional events?*

*What is an optimal transformative space like?*

*How do the 10 Principles of Burning Man create an environment that fosters transformations?*

The thesis aimed to answer the question of what makes Burning Man and its regional events optimal environments for human transformations to emerge. When deciding on the research approach the author had to consider which approach would provide the most insight on the topic and best answer for the research questions.

Qualitative approach is known to fit for research that aims to explore or formulate new hypotheses (Streefkerk 2019). It allows the researcher to inquire into social phenomena in natural settings, such as how people experience certain aspects of their lives (Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa & Varpio 2015). It gives the researcher a wider understanding on phenomena experiences, and context (Cleland 2017). General disadvantages of qualitative research are considered to be being biased, anecdotal and lacking rigor. However, when carried out properly it is unbiased, credible and rigorous. (Anderson 2010.)

Quantitative research is considered to be optimal when testing already existing hypotheses (Streefkerk 2019). Quantitative research provides the researcher factual and reliable data that can be generalized usually in larger populations (Verhoef & Casebeer 1997). However, it fails to access deeper underlying meanings and explanations and clarify the complexity of a phenomena (Rahman 2016).

Since the aim of this thesis is to explore the transformative nature of Burning Man and how its 10 principles provide an optimal space for human transformations, which by nature are considered highly subjective and ineffable, the author concluded qualitative approach to be the best fit. The research method utilized in this thesis was semi-structured interview.

### **3.1 Semi-structured interview**

A semi-structured interview employs a predetermined thematic framework for asking questions, yet it does not adhere to a fixed order or wording for the questions. The thematic framework keeps the interview focused on topic while the freedom to ask additional questions and change the order of questions provides a richness that a structured interview may lack. (George 2023.) The flexibility, however, can lead to lower validity of the results since the questions asked can vary a lot per interview. Additionally, semi-structured interviews are more prone to observation bias since the option to ask additional leading questions is available. (George 2023.)

When choosing the research method, the author had to consider which method would provide the best approach to collect the data needed for the research. Since transformative experiences are unique to each person, the author wanted to have the flexibility to ask additional questions in the interview based on each experience shared. Moreover, the author wanted to have a structure for the interview in order to keep focus on the research aim and reduce the overall time of the interviews. For these reasons semi-structured interview was seen as the best fit for the primary data collection method of this thesis.

### **3.2 Data collection process and research planning**

When planning the interviewing process, the aim was to have 5-10 interviewees who had attended at least one burn and had experienced a transformation through these events or through being part of the burner community. According to Cleland (2017), to ensure the validity of the research the researcher needs to make sure that the research design explicitly includes diverse viewpoints. Therefore, the author aimed to include a range of experienced burners and people who are newer to the scene. A predetermined thematic questionnaire was created for the interviews based on the theoretical framework presented in this thesis. Each element of the theoretical framework had at least one question created based on them. Table 2 presents the correlation of the interview

questions to the theoretical framework. Figure 6 shows a visual representation of the questions being aligned with the framework. Full list of predefined interview questions can be found in appendix 1.

Table 2. Semi-structured interview questions based on the theoretical framework (Kettunen 2024)

Source	Element	Author's focus	Question
Pine & Gilmore (1998)	The Four Realms of an Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Escapist realm:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Immersion</li> <li>- Active participation</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Esthetic realm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What makes the environment of a burn immersive? Why?</li> <li>- What kind of contrast did you find in the physical environment to your environment in the default world?</li> </ul>
Tarsanen & Kylänen (2006)	The Experience Pyramid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multi-sensory perception</li> <li>- Interaction</li> <li>- Authenticity</li> <li>- Contrast</li> <li>- Individuality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What kind of interaction did you have with your physical environment?</li> <li>- What makes Burning Man an authentic experience to you?</li> <li>- Did you feel like the bar to interact with people was lower than in the default world? If so, why?</li> <li>- Did you discover new aspects of yourself? If so, what do you think allowed you to do that?</li> <li>- How do you think this contrast is achieved?</li> </ul>
Neuhofer, Celuch & To (2022)	Transformative Experience Vehicle of Festivals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Liminality of fostering the self</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Did you feel like it was easier for you to be yourself at a burn than in the default world? If so, why?</li> </ul>
Neuhofer, Egger, Yu & Celuch (2021)	Composition of Inner Sphere Topic and Outer Sphere Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Socio-psychological topics</li> <li>- Socio-environmental topics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How would you describe the social atmosphere / the psychological environment of the burn(s) you have attended?</li> <li>- Do you feel like attending a burn helped you find community? If so, why?</li> <li>- How would you describe the physical environment of the burn(s) you have attended?</li> </ul>

Source	Element	Author's focus	Question
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Is there a lot of differences in the physical environment between the burns you have attended?</li> <li>– What are the similarities in the burns you have attended?</li> <li>– Did the physical environment of the burn induce your transformation? If so, how?</li> <li>– What aspect of the physical environment has been the most memorable to you? Why?</li> </ul>
The Burning Man Project (2024)	The 10 Principles of Burning Man	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Radical inclusion</li> <li>– Gifting</li> <li>– Decommodification</li> <li>– Radical self-reliance</li> <li>– Radical self-expression</li> <li>– communal effort</li> <li>– civic responsibility</li> <li>– leave no trace</li> <li>– participation</li> <li>– immediacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Is there any specific principle that you would associate with the transformation you have experienced? If so which one and why?</li> </ul>

## Interview questions

### physical environment

- How would you describe the physical environment of the burn(s) you have attended?
- Is there a lot of differences in the physical environment between the burns you have attended?
- What are the similarities in the burns you have attended?
- Did the physical environment of the burn induce your transformation? If so, how?

#### aesthetic contrast

- What kind of contrast did you find in the physical environment to your environment in the default world?
- What aspect of the physical environment has been the most memorable to you? Why?
- How do you think this contrast is achieved?

#### immersion of multiple senses

- What makes the environment of a burn immersive? Why?

#### interactivity

- What kind of interaction did you have with your physical environment?

#### authenticity

- What makes Burning Man an authentic experience to you?

### psychological environment

- How would you describe the social atmosphere / the psychological environment of the burn(s) you have attended?

#### individuality

- Did you discover new aspects of yourself? If so what do you think allowed you to do that?

#### liminality of fostering the self

- Did you feel like it was easier for you to be yourself at a burn than in the default world? If so why?

#### interaction & community

- Did you feel like the bar to interact with people was lower than in the default world? If so why?
- Do you feel like attending a burn helped you find community? If so why?

#### The 10 principles of Burning Man

- Is there any specific principle that you would associate with the transformation you have experienced? If so which one and why?

Figure 6. Interview questions in correlation to the theoretical framework (Kettunen 2024)

The aims for the interview were to find out how do the 10 Principles create an optimal environment for transformations to emerge, what is an optimal environment for transformations, and how the social and physical environment of Burning Man allow people to transform. Nine people that had been to at least one burn were interviewed. All interviewees had experienced either a transformative experience at a burn or a transformation over time by attending burns and being part of the burner community. The interviewees were reached out to via WhatsApp, Slack, Telegram and email. The interviewees received the description of the aims for the interview, list of the predefined questions and a time estimation for the interview. This information was shared beforehand in order to give the interviewees the opportunity to consider and prepare their answers, which would optimally reduce the length of the interview. Additionally consent for recording the interview was asked beforehand.

The interviews were held on google meets. The author used Google Workspace to send calendar invites and to access meeting recording and transcription functionalities. Each interview had one hour reserved for them based on a test interview that the author conducted before the actual interviews. Furthermore, the interviews were limited to one hour to prevent the fatigue for both interviewer and respondent (Adams 2015). The interviews lasted 45 minutes in average. The author reaffirmed consent to record and transcribe the interviews in the beginning of each interview to make sure each participant was aware and allowing of the recording.

The data-collection for this thesis was conducted in one and a half weeks in April 2024. The time period selected for the interviews was based on the author's ambition to collect all the data in a short period of time due to changes in the schedule of the thesis. The short data collection period allowed the author to spend an appropriate time on the data analysis process.

### **3.3 Data analysis process**

This thesis utilized a five-phase process for qualitative data analysis (Bingham 2023). This process includes first organizing the data, then sorting it, understanding it, interpreting it, and finally explaining it. The process is visualized in figure 7.

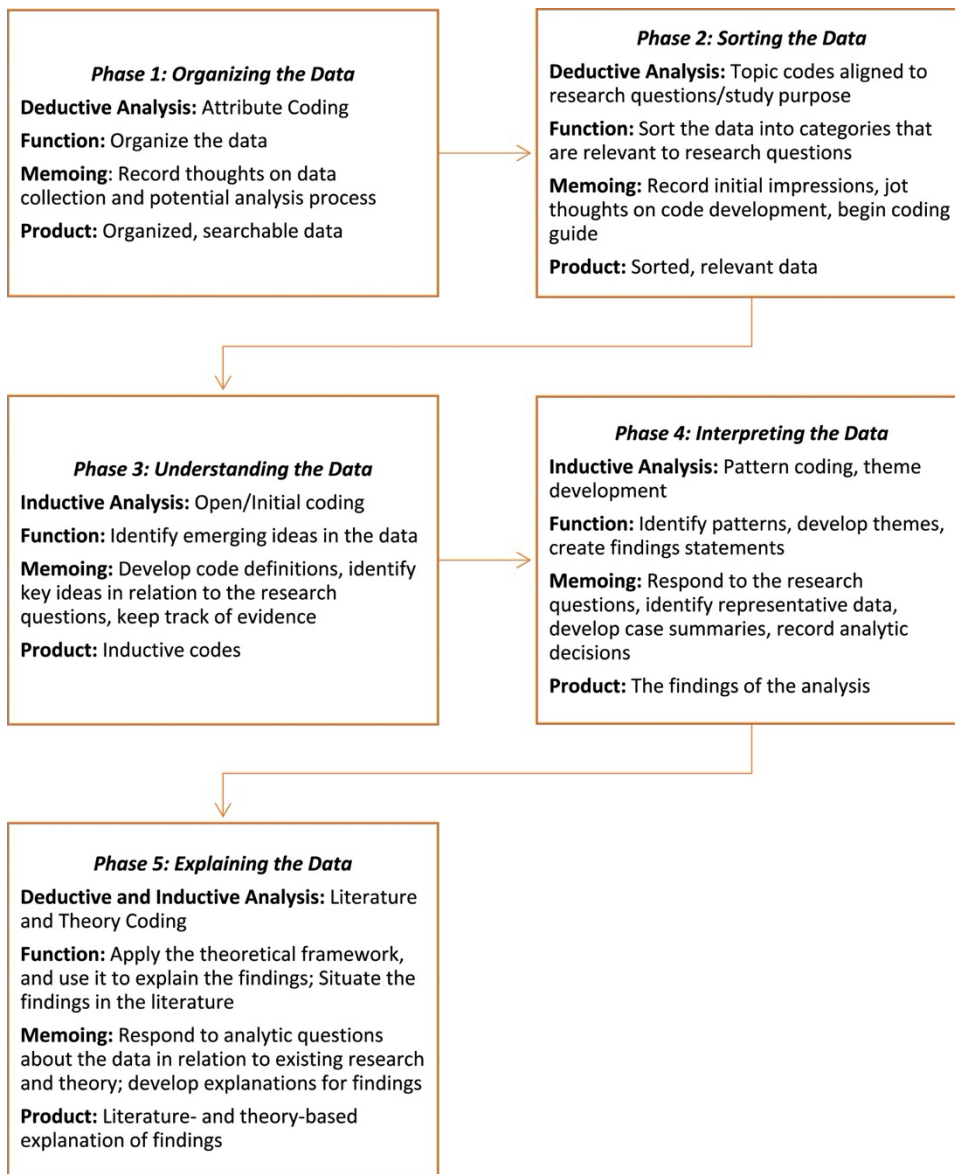


Figure 7. The five-phase process of qualitative data analysis (Bingham 2023)

In order to go through this process, the interviews had to be first transcribed. This was done simultaneously while recording the meetings. One important notice is that there can be potential data loss when conducting semi-structured interviews not online (Kakilla 2021). This problem emerged when going through the automatically created transcriptions. Accordingly, the author had to refer to the recordings whenever there was a gap in the information of the transcription.

The first phase of the five-phase process is to organize the data. This includes attribute coding and writing down the initial thoughts and ideas for the data-analysis process. (Bingham 2023.) Transcripts were organized and named based on each interview. Each interview transcript was read, and recordings were rewatched to get a general idea of the data that was collected. Data gaps in

the transcripts were filled in by referring to the recordings. Parts of the transcripts were highlighted for potential use in later phases.

In the second phase the data is sorted into categories that are essentials to research questions (Bingham 2023). In this phase broader topic codes were created to further sort the data. The topic codes emerging from the data in this thesis were the cause of transformation, physical environment's impact on the transformation, social environment's impact on the transformation and the burner community's impact on personal transformation. These topic codes were aligned with the research questions of this thesis.

The third phase of the process focuses on finding emerging ideas from the data. This is done through the process of creating open code definitions. (Bingham 2023.) In this phase the data was further refined into more specific codes under the initial topic codes created in phase two. Ideas and concepts that could be later formed into themes and utilized were highlighted. In this phase the data was being compared to find unifying codes across it.

In the fourth phase the aim is to develop findings from the analysis (Bingham 2023). The codes created in the previous phase were reviewed and patterns that emerged from across the data were made into themes. In this thesis some of the themes were aligned with the theoretical framework that was proposed in this thesis (figure 5) including the seven features of the transformative space: aesthetic contrast, immersion of multiple senses, interactivity, authenticity, individuality, liminality of fostering the self, and community and interaction. Emerging themes from the data were safety and challenge. These would be later reflected on both the physical and social environment.

In the fifth and final phase the connections in the data to the theoretical framework are being identified (Bingham 2023). Here the themes that were created in the previous phase were connected to the theoretical framework. Since the questions for the interviews were created based on the theoretical framework (figure 5), aligning the themes with the elements of the theoretical framework was relatively straightforward.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

The ethical considerations for the research of this thesis were considered before conducting the data collection. In qualitative research the anonymity and the privacy of the interviewees' information must be protected (Mirza 2023). Considering the highly personal nature of the topic, transformative experiences, all interviewees, and their recognizable attributes are thus kept anonymous in this thesis. The anonymity of the interviewees was addressed in the beginning of each interview.

Due to the active participatory nature that the semi-structured interview requires from the researcher, recording the interview proves beneficial as handwritten notes taken during the session are somewhat unreliable, increasing the risk of the researcher overlooking crucial points (Jamshed 2014). When the method of recording audio or video the participants should be informed and asked for their consent along with procedures used for transcribing the data (Anderson 2010). Therefore, all participants were asked their consent for recording and transcribing the interview before the interview and in the beginning of the interview in order to verify the consent of the interviewee.

Participants who were concerned about the usage of the data and the recording of their interview were affirmed that both the recording and the transcript would be destroyed after the data analysis process had been completed. The estimation given for the participants was a time period of two weeks. The participants who asked for this procedure were informed via message when the material had been deleted.

Since in ethically correctly conducted qualitative research any instances of conflicts of interest or bias need to be clearly disclosed (Mirza 2023), the participants were shared the aim of the interview and the questions it seeks to answer. Additionally, participants were shared the predefined thematic framework of questions that would guide the interview. All participants were informed that the use case for the interview was this thesis.

To increase the validity, the research design should incorporate a wide range of different perspectives (Cleland 2017). Thus, the data collection process of this thesis aimed to include interviewees from different geographical locations, backgrounds, and years of experience of attending burns. Additionally, the author embraced both transformative experiences at burn events and transformation journeys through the burner community. Although not predetermined when searching for participants, the thesis includes perspectives from both active members of the burner community and ones who reject it.

The time limit for the interviews was set to be one hour to avoid the risk of harm by over exhausting the interviewee. Additional questions were asked in order to clarify any points made by interviewees that could have been misinterpreted by the interviewer. In qualitative research, translation could potentially introduce notable bias (Mirza 2023). Therefore, all interviews were conducted in the final language of the thesis, English, regardless of the other languages the interviewer and the interviewee had in common.

## **4 Findings and analysis**

This chapter presents the findings of the research that was done for this thesis. The data was collected by conducting nine semi-structured interviews. The participants included newer burners with one to five years of experience as well as long-time burners with more than ten years of experience in burns. This thesis utilized the five-phase process of qualitative data analysis (Bingham 2023). The findings are presented in the structure of the theoretical framework introduced in this thesis (figure 5).

### **4.1 The experience of the physical environment**

To find answers to the question of what makes Burning Man an optimal environment for transformations, firstly the author found important to further the understanding of the environment of burns. The first half of the interview focused on the aspects of the physical environment. The findings of the physical environment are presented in figure 8.

## The physical environment

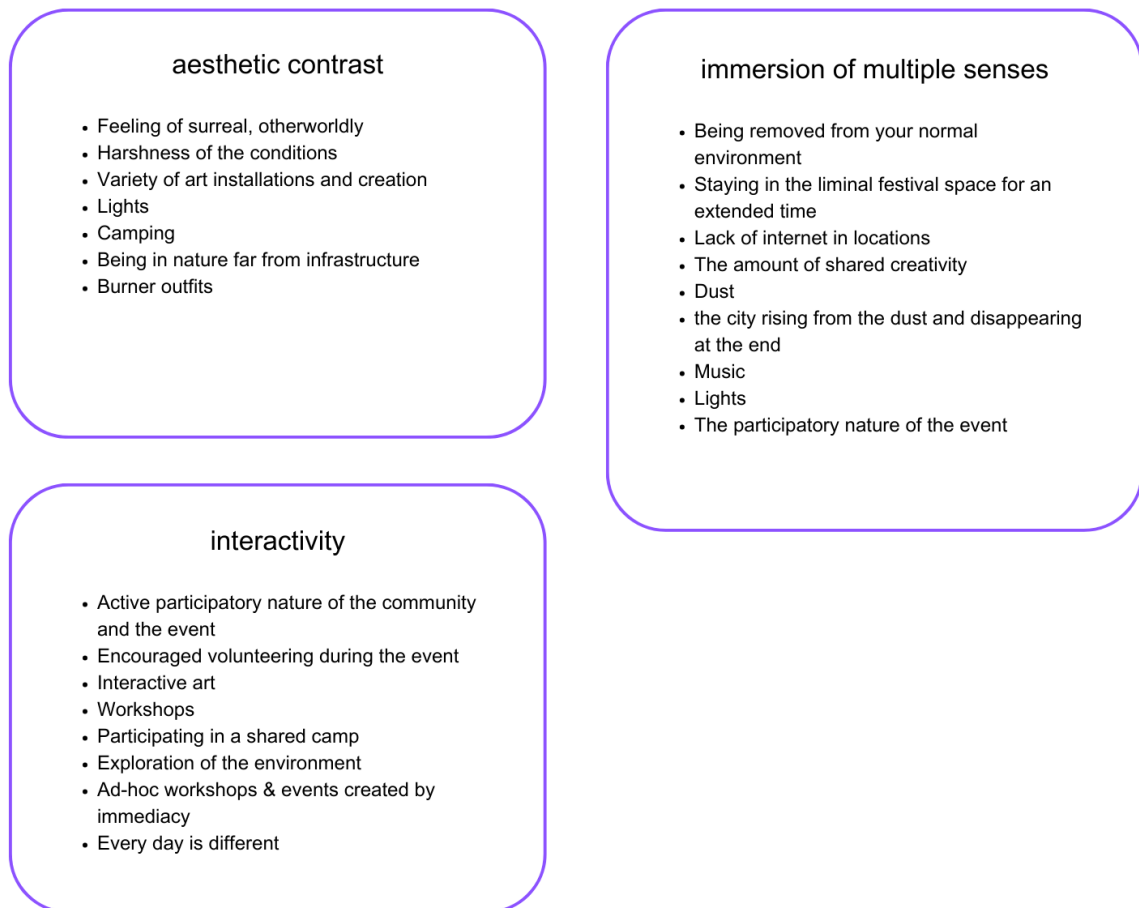


Figure 8. Findings of the physical environment (Kettunen 2024)

**The aesthetic contrast** of the physical environment was described with different perspectives based on each interviewee. General themes that came up were the otherworldly and surreal feeling of the environment. This correlated with the variety of art installations and lights found in the festival area. One interviewee described the aesthetic of the physical environment followingly:

*“It was a new kind of a disco. It almost felt like I was on another planet I guess because it was decorated so nicely”.*

Another perspective that arose on the contrast of the physical environment was the pure harshness of the conditions that attendees have to endure in the environment of many burns. Since Burning Man and many of its regional events are located in nature, the natural environment itself

poses a contrast to the default environment of an individual. Therefore, being far from infrastructure and in nature camping were seen as a contrast to the default environment of the interviewed burners.

**The immersion of senses** was described with both the influence of the natural environment and the created liminal festival space. Common themes that arose were being removed from the default environment of an individual and staying in the liminal festival space for multiple days with the same people:

*“I think honestly one immersive factor is the fact that most people are there the whole time and it's a certain amount of people. It's not just like a normal festival where people go out come back in”.*

Big immersive factor for many interviewees was the lack of internet connection in the location of the burn. This allowed them to immerse themselves in their environment and the present moment easier. One interviewee shared their perspective on modern music festival opposed to burns:

*“People will record on the phone there will be accepting posting on social media. And it's impossible to be immersed in something when your brain is doing something else”.*

Themes that correlated to the immersive nature of the manufactured environment were the amount of shared creativity including, art, music, and the lights. The interviewees that had attended Burning Man brought up the fact of seeing Black Rock City rise from the dust and disappear again at the end as one of the immersive aspects of the event. Finally, the participatory nature of the event was a common theme on immersion among the interviewees. One interviewee explained:

*“You cook or together. You do workshops together. So you then become a part of something than just again spectator”.*

Another interviewee shared their views on why one of the regional burns, the Borderland in Sweden, is immersive due to its enforcement of active participation:

*“You're not buying a ticket you're buying a membership. And then it's communicated very clearly that unless you members do a toilet, there's no toilet unless you members choose to put water here. Everything is communicated in that way that it's up to the people who bought the membership, and everybody needs to buy it”.*

Active participation was a major theme also connecting to **the interactivity** of the physical environment at burns. The interviewees pointed out that the community encourages participants to

volunteer during the event and participate in workshops and other activities. Participating in a camp was also seen as one of the core aspects of the interactivity at the event. Interactive art and the exploration of the playa emerged among the interviewees when asked about the interactivity of their physical environment:

*“I think the physical environments of the burns I've been to, especially that in Black Rock City, are very encouraging to kind of play around, join experience. Most of the art in Black Rock City is designed in a way that you can interact with it. Maybe you can climb it or maybe you can touch it, or maybe it's some kind of a game or you can create something with it.”*

Additionally, the principle of immediacy was linked to interactivity of the environment. This would manifest as reacting to a situation by taking the charge, for example in the form of a spontaneous workshop or fixing a broken facility.

*“When you have an idea, you do it. It's not like consuming. Of course, you also enjoy music that is given to you or an art piece that others created but you organize what you offer to the community.”*

#### **4.2 The experience of the psychological environment**

The second half of the interview focused on the psychological environment of burns. This included questions on individuality, authenticity, community and interaction as well as liminality of fostering the self. The findings are illustrated in figure 9.

## The psychological environment

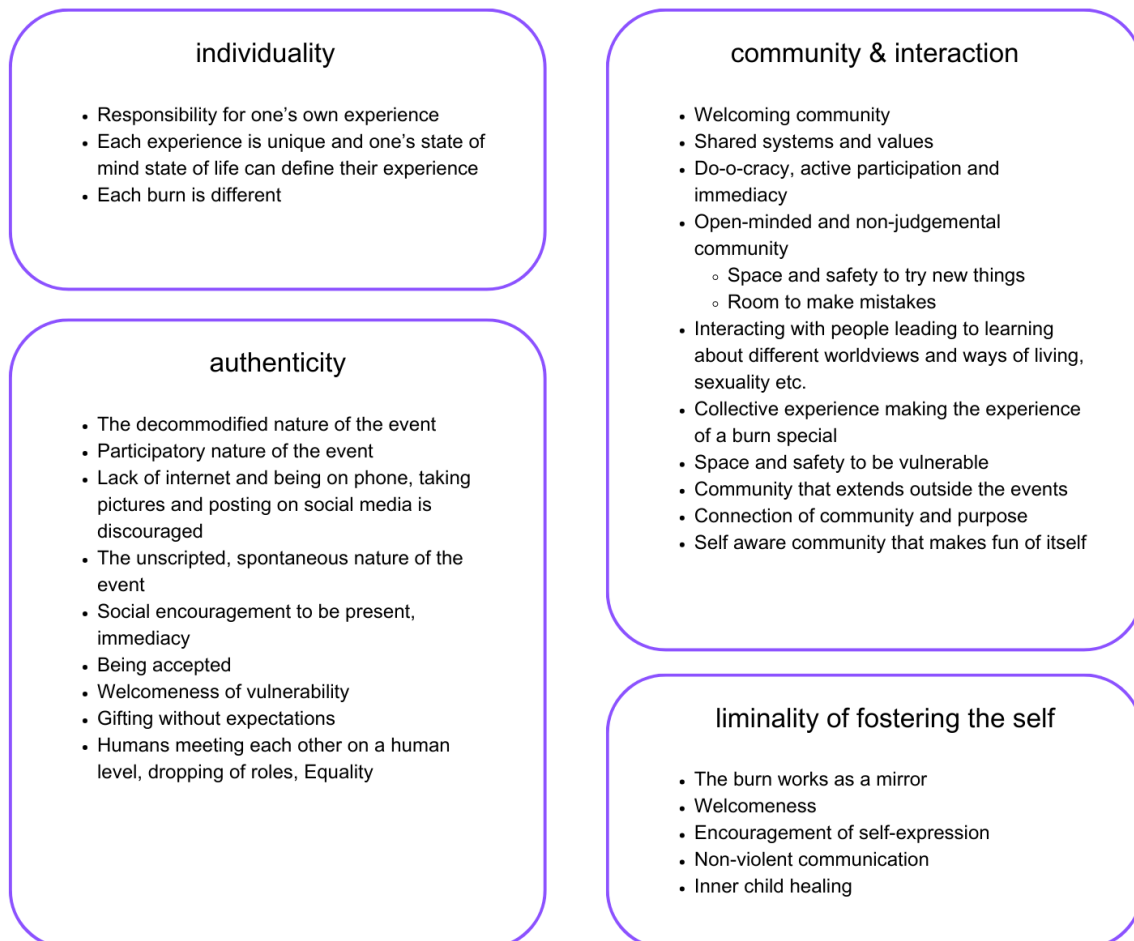


Figure 9. Experience of the psychological environment (Kettunen 2024)

**Individuality**, meaning the uniqueness of an experience, as an aspect of the psychological environment brought up themes relating to radical self-reliance. An echo from many of the interviews reflected that one is in charge of their own experience and needs to take responsibility over it. Another view on individuality that emerged through multiple interviews was the impact one's state of mind can have on the person's experience at a burn. One participant reflected:

*"If you go out there going everybody loves me and I'm here to be supported. You'll probably get that. And burns can be a funny reflection of where we are in our head".*

The question on **the authenticity** of the burn environment received varied answers. This is due to the subjective nature of authenticity and what it means to each individual. However, themes on authenticity emerged across multiple interviews, one of the leading aspects being the decommodified nature of the events:

*“I think the non-commerciality, the fact that you are not coming there to purchase entertainment but to participate to be the entertainment for others and be entertained by others. That mentality really is what brings the authenticity. And a lot of people bring their authentic self”.*

Themes of immediacy and the participatory nature of the event came up when discussing authenticity. Interviewees pointed out that the social environment is encouraging participants to be present in the moment. This was also illustrated through the fact that in burns the use of phones and posting on social media is generally discouraged. Furthermore, the spontaneous nature of the event was brought up as a key aspect of authenticity.

Authenticity was also seen having links to gifting without expectations, feeling accepted, the welcomeness of vulnerability and the experience of equality. This was elaborated through the idea of humans meeting each other as humans and not as their titles or backgrounds:

*“You make some jokes together or kind of explore the burn. Whether you talk about your experience there or those kind of things, instead kind of following some kind of a script where you ask the other person about their job and family status and where they live, there the way of getting to know people is over different way”.*

The theme that emerged most commonly around the topic of **community and interaction** was the welcomeness of the community. Thoughts on being welcome to be part of the community as long as you agree with the principles emerged among some interviewees. The welcomeness was connected to the open-minded and non-judgmental atmosphere, which many related to the hippie culture. Many participants felt like they were able to be vulnerable and share openly about their experiences at the burn environment. Furthermore, the welcoming and non-judgmental community was seen as a major enabler of participants trying new things including new roles without the fear of failure. One participant reflects:

*“People come to a burn and they can lead something, for example younger people who've never been given responsibility. It's responded with, okay, you want to do something you've ever done? Great. We'll support you”.*

Contradictory to the overall experience of the burner community being welcoming among interviewees, multiple interviewees expressed that they felt left out and like they didn't belong when they first attended an event. One reason, an interviewee expressed, is the tight knit nature of many parts of the community and the number of concepts to grasp can be difficult for a newcomer.

For many participants the thing that made the burn experience special were the people and sharing the experience with them. One of the aspects found in the community were the interactions and the opportunity to learn new things through them, such as different worldviews, lifestyles, and expressions of sexuality. Overall, what many of the interviewees found transformative was the community that extends outside the events.

The aspect of **liminality of fostering the self**, in other words the freedom of self-expression, love and unity, was enabled by the welcomeness and the encouragement to self-expression by the community. Some interviewees brought up the aspect of substances and how they can have an influence in the experience of the aspects of fostering the self. Many felt that the safe and non-judgmental atmosphere of the community allowed them to be playful and even childlike. One participant shared:

*"You're bringing out your inner child. So, the first thing is definitely the costumes and being dressed up. It reminds you when you were a kid and so by being dressed up you feel like you can be another person".*

Another aspect that emerged from multiple interviews was the mirror-like nature of the social environment at a burn. One interviewee illustrated:

*"I would describe it a type of a mirror held up and that enabled me to see myself. In a different light than I am able to do the default world and it enabled me to see different kind of strengths and flaws and appreciate them. In an unusual way".*

Along the topic of radical self-expression, some interviewees pointed out that burns have the potential to become a so-called self-expression trap if an individual feels like they can only express themselves in the burn environment. This can be seen in the form of burn personas, which are that an individual is a completely different person in the burn environment compared to what they are like in their default world environment. However, most interviewees found their self-expression to be as easy in their default environment as in the burn environment. Although, the experience of feeling accepted and welcomed was accelerated in the burn environment.

### 4.3 The optimal transformative space

An overarching theme across the majority of the interviews was the topic of safety and how it enables transformations. Seven out of nine interviewees brought up the topic of safety and safer spaces when discussing transformations at burns. One of the interviewees encapsulated their view on transformative spaces followingly:

*“There is something about going to a new place that is challenging and I think the combination of challenge and safety, there is something about that”.*

#### The balance of safety and challenge

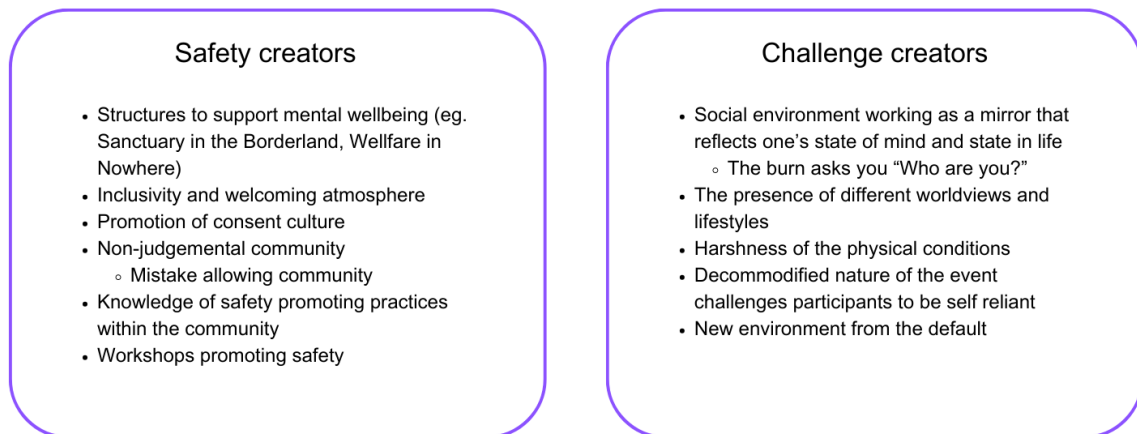


Figure 10. The balance of safety and challenge (Kettunen 2024)

The themes of safety and challenge (figure 10) emerged in multiple interviews as key factors to the transformative nature of burns. Safety creating factors that came up in the interviews were structures that support mental wellbeing such as the Sanctuary in a Swedish regional burn the Borderland and Wellfare in a Spanish regional burn Nowhere. These structures help participants who are dealing with for example overwhelm by offering conversation help, emotional support, and a place to rest. Radical inclusivity and the overall welcoming atmosphere were experienced as major safety creators and the reason why multiple interviewees felt more comfortable expressing themselves as well as their vulnerability. The community was experienced as nonjudgmental by many interviewees and allowed them to feel comfortable to make mistakes. This allowed many participants to feel comfortable to take on new roles that they wouldn't have done necessarily outside a burn.

An important aspect to safety which was brought up by multiple interviewees is consent. Consent has been added as an 11<sup>th</sup> principle at many regional burns due to its crucial importance in creating a safe space. However, it is not an official principle of Burning Man. The culture of consent and its promotion through workshops was seen as a major safety enabler among the interviewees. One interviewee emphasized the importance of consent enabling transformation in women:

*“A lot of times especially for women, if you want to challenge yourself in certain ways, dress differently or go somewhere alone, or experiment with whatever, there's danger for everybody, but there's danger there. So what enforces transformation is this idea that you can challenge yourself and experiment but at any time you have the right to say, actually no”.*

A challenge creator that emerged among the interviewees was the harshness of the physical conditions. This was seen to induce radical self-reliance as well as community cohesion and civic responsibility. The challenge creators in the psychological environment were the presence of different worldviews and the environment working as a mirror for one to reflect on themselves. One interviewee shared:

*“The transformative thing of burns is really that it asks you who are you when there's no one around you. When you don't have the role that your friends gave to you, your partner or your life gives to you”.*

The aspect of going to a new environment and being fully immersed in it was another challenge creator that arose. Finally, the decommodified nature of burns poses another challenge for participants to be self-reliant and remove expectations.

When asked if Burning Man and its regional events are optimal spaces for transformations, the interviewees had varied responses. Many viewed burns as a good environment for transformations but only for some people. They brought up the fact that burns may not be an optimal transformative space for everyone due to their socially and physically overwhelming nature. Attending burns requires certain level of open mindedness since you might be exposed to many things you're not used to. Furthermore, the meaning of safety can vary from person to person. Couple interviewees viewed burns as a good structure, a blank canvas on which participants can create their own experience. These interviewees saw that the transformation was dependent on how the person was going to do the burn and with what mindset. Others saw it as a very optimal option for transformation due to its ability of invoking self-growth and its unlike nature to the default society.

#### **4.4 What caused transformation?**

When asked on the cause of the transformation, multiple interviewees related their transformation to finding their community. The transformations were mostly related to participants discovering new aspects of themselves, a process which was enabled by finding likeminded people who could teach each other new things. Many found active participation and experimenting with new roles in the community to be transformative. For some, self-growth was only experienced when they went to a burn alone without knowing anyone beforehand. This allowed them to let go of any preassigned roles they might have carried before the event.

Some participants emphasized the importance of facing challenge and how growth often emerges when we struggle. However, others found their transformation to be directly linked to the high-level feeling of safety and inclusivity which they had never experienced before. One participant experienced their transformation through letting go of expectations that they had had prior to the event. Lastly, some interviewees had a transformation through a sexual experience and through the experience of expressing themselves radically.

## 5 Conclusions and discussion

This chapter reflects on the outcomes of the thesis. Additionally, it assesses the reliability and validity of the research findings and proposes improvements for future research. Lastly, it concludes with the author's reflections on the overall thesis and learning journey.

### 5.1 Conclusions

The objective of this thesis was to investigate how the values of the Burning Man community, known as the 10 Principles of Burning Man, create an environment that fosters human transformations. The thesis explored the topic of transformative experiences in the context of liminal festival environments of Burning Man and its regional events. It presented a framework for an optimal transformative space which was created based on the 10 Principles of Burning Man as well as previous research in the field of transformative experiences.

The research collected data by interviewing nine people who had experienced a transformation at a burn or through being part of the burner community. The answers of the interviewees varied greatly due to the subjectivity of experiences and what it means to have a transformation. However, there were connecting themes across the data which allowed the author to come to conclusion of what makes Burning Man a potential environment for people to have transformative experiences in. The conclusions are presented by undertaking each sub-question this research posed and finally looking at the main research question and the findings for it.

Firstly, what is a human transformation? Chapter 2.2 presented a definition for transformative experience (Paul 2014), according to which an experience is transformative when it is radically new to the individual creating an epistemic inaccessibility while also fundamentally changing their who they are after the experience. The interviewees for this thesis experienced their transformations in different ways, yet ultimately most of the participants felt that they had discovered new aspects of themselves and learned something new either through attending a burn or being part of the burner community.

The next sub-question, what causes people to transform at Burning Man and its regional events? Chapter 2.3 explored different triggers for transformative experiences in liminal festival spaces. It introduced previous research on the socio-environmental and socio-psychological triggers for transformations in the environment of Burning Man. The semi-structured interviews for this thesis found varied causes for transformation in burns. Four out of nine interviewees found their transformation through being part of the burner community. Few correlated their transformation to a sexual experience. Overall, the themes of safety and challenge were linked to the transformation of

majority of the interviewees. The findings of this thesis implied the safety of the social environment to be largely due to non-judgmental and welcoming atmosphere.

Following sub-question was: what is an optimal transformative space like? Findings from the interviews lead to the direction of an environment that provides safety while also being able to challenge an individual. The social environment should be welcoming and non-judgmental, optimally allowing the individual to show up as they are. The importance of removing oneself from their everyday environment for a set period of time, and the experience being intensified when doing this alone were brought up additionally. The social environment should be allowing of people making mistakes for people to feel more inclined to take on new roles and therefore challenge themselves. A study on radical safety in temporary organizations concludes that participants experienced radical safety, the safety to take inter-personal risks, when they were given the freedom to choose their role in the project and the processes of the project were decided in a co-created manner (Salmivaara, Martela & Heikkilä 2020). Finally, the environment should be allowing of people to explore freely while providing the facilities that promote safety, such as the Sanctuary in a Swedish regional burn, the Borderland.

The final sub-question was how do the 10 Principles of Burning Man create an environment that fosters transformations? The thesis presented a framework for optimal transformative space that maps the 10 Principles of Burning Man under different elements of a transformative space (figure 5). The mapping of the principles aligned with the data from the semi-structured interviews with the following additions. The data showed the principle of immediacy to have a strong correlation with immersion of multiple senses. The principle of immediacy promoting being present in the moment and acting on a situation as it comes was seen as an immersive factor to many interviewees. For the same reason immediacy was also correlated to interactivity since the principle encourages participants to interact with a situation if needed. Additionally, the author chose to include the 11<sup>th</sup> unofficial principle, consent, in the framework since it was seen as a major safety creator and enabler for transformations in the context of burns. Lastly, the principle of participation was found to have correlation with authenticity, thus, it was added under the element. The changes are illustrated in figure 11.

## The 10 Principles of Burning Man creating an optimal transformative space

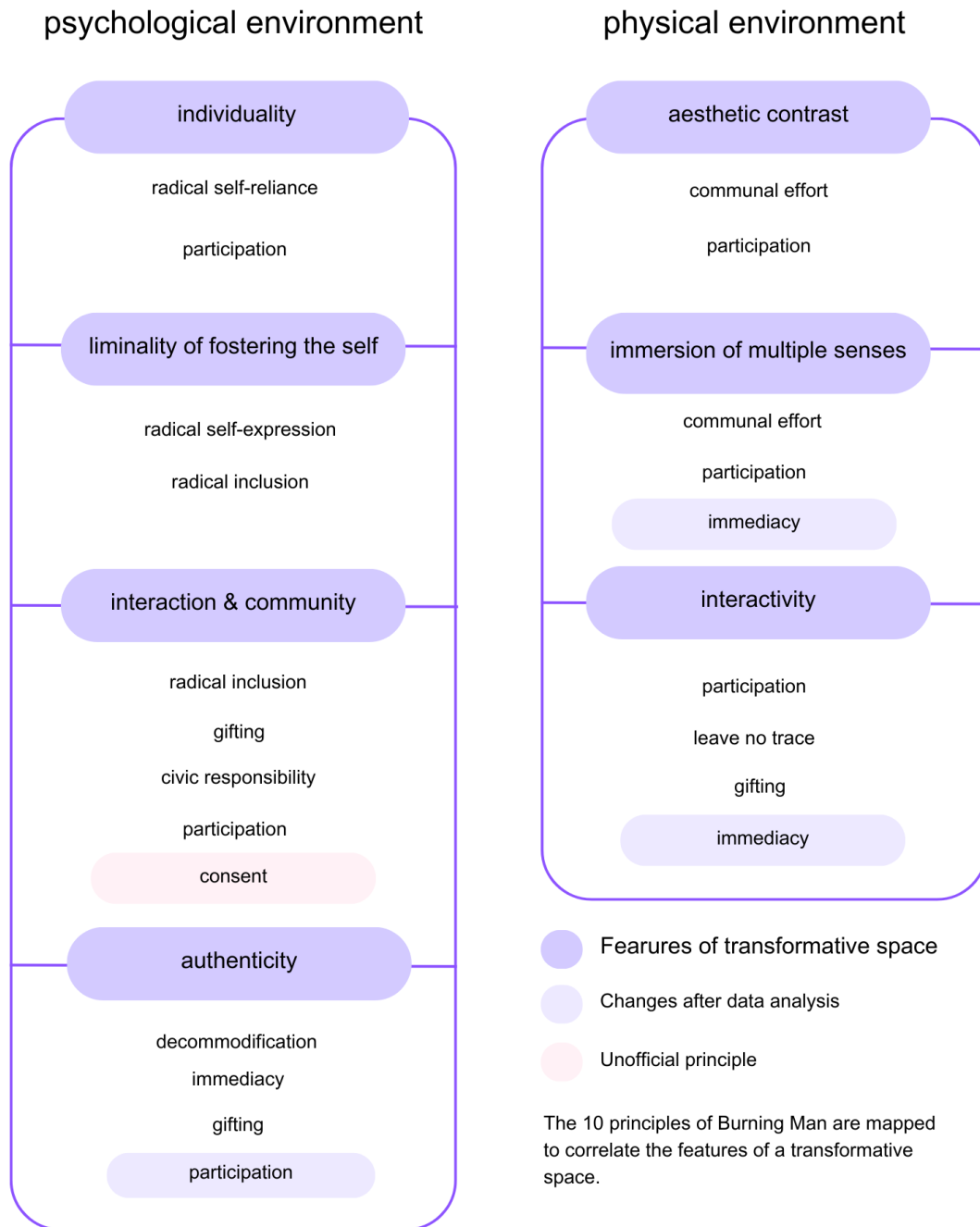


Figure 11. The 10 Principles of Burning Man creating an optimal transformative space, recomposed after data analysis process (Kettunen 2024)

Each principle has a purpose which also contributes to the creation of a structure that allows transformations to emerge.

The principle of **radical inclusion** was found to be mostly connected to the element of community and interaction. It contributes to the safety of the social environment by creating a welcoming and non-judgmental atmosphere in which participants feel comfortable exploring new aspects of themselves and take on new roles without the fear of failing.

The principle of **gifting** was found to have links to authenticity, and interaction and community. The culture of gifting without expectations increases the feeling of authenticity since the motives behind giving out the gift aren't based on financial or other benefits. It also further increases interactions within in the community since it's by nature prone to start conversations.

The principle of **decommodification** was mostly linked with authenticity. For many of the interviewees for this thesis, the decommodified nature of burns was associated with authenticity because it removes any commercial motives which might not have the participants' best interest in mind. Decommodification can also create equality within the events since there is no money spent once the event begins.

The principle of **radical self-reliance** correlated with the element of individuality. The principle indicates to the control and responsibility that one has over their own experience. Since individuality refers to the uniqueness and customizability of the experience, the principle of radical self-reliance provides the social atmosphere for freedom to make your own experience.

The principle of **radical self-expression** is directly correlated with liminality of fostering the self since the original framework from which the element was derived from includes free self-expression as one of the core characteristics of liminality of fostering the self (Neuhofer, Celuch & To 2022). The findings of the semi-structured interviews seem to indicate that the principle of radical self-expression contributes to the social environment of burns by making it more accepting and encouraging experimentation.

The principle of **communal effort** is directly linked with community and interaction. This manifests within the events as participants contributing to creating the event and all aspects of it. Thus, it can be correlated with aesthetic contrast since this principle promotes the creation and upkeep of the liminal festival area with all of its art installations and camps. It further refers to the fostering of the community.

The principle of **civic responsibility** seems to have correlation with community and interaction. Civic responsibility increases community cohesion in a way that it advocates for the care taking of

its members. At a burn this can manifest as helping a stranger who is feeling unwell. Civic responsibility creates safety within the community, allowing members to trust that when in trouble, help will be received.

The principle of **leaving no trace** has connection with interaction with the physical environment as well as community. This principle makes sure that the environment of the events stays clean and is left better than it was found. For this is a communal responsibility, it creates cohesion since it requires team effort to achieve these goals.

The principle of **participation** seems to have correlation with nearly all the elements of a transformative space. This may not come as surprising since Burning Man is participatory based event. Participation allows individuals to feel immersed in their environment because they are actively part of it. This is directly correlated with the escapist realm which is a combination of immersion and active participation (Pine & Gilmore 1998). Participation promotes interaction with the environment and allows the environment of the burn to be created in the first place. It allows individuals to create their own experience and find community. For many, participation is linked to authenticity since one is not merely consuming an experience but actively creating it by being part of it.

The principle of **immediacy** seemed to have correlation with immersion of multiple senses for it encourages participants to be in the present moment, interactivity since it promotes immediate problem solving and authenticity, for an experience cannot be authentic if one is not really present. Immediacy is connected to the lack of cellphone usage, which was a major factor of immersion and authenticity for multiple interviewees of this thesis.

Additionally, the 11<sup>th</sup> unofficial principle of **consent** was found to have a connection with community and interaction. Consent was highlighted to be one of the key factors of creating the experience of safety in the social environment of burns. Furthermore, the communication and education on the topic of consent allows individuals within the community to grow and become better at communicating boundaries and advocate for safer spaces.

Finally, the main research question was what makes Burning Man and its regional events optimal environments for human transformation. Due to the subjective nature of transformative experiences, what makes an environment optimal for transformations for one person might not work for another. However, some valuable insights emerged from the research of this thesis which indicates for the characteristics of a potential transformative space. Most commonly, the themes of safety and challenge emerged from the semi-structured interviews regarding the transformative nature of the environment at burns. This balance of safety and challenge is created by the different aspects of the psychological and physical environment which are widely influenced by the 10 Principles of

Burning Man. Conclusively, it seems that what makes Burning Man and its regional events potential environments for transformations is their ability to provide a welcoming, non-judgmental safe space which supports self-exploration and growth while challenging individuals to go outside their comfort zone and push their limits. Burning Man provides a space that allows one to drop their pre-assigned roles by asking for an authentic response to a simple question: "Who are you?"

## **5.2 Validity, reliability, and future research suggestions**

The validity of a research study pertains to the degree to which the outcomes observed among the study participants accurately reflect the outcomes that would be observed among comparable individuals who are not part of the study (Patino & Ferreira 2018). This research has its limitations when it comes to its validity and reliability.

The factors that might decrease the validity of the research are the following. Firstly, it was not specified that interviewees should have had one specific transformative experience at a burn but it accepted interviewees who described their transformations as more of a journey that happened overtime by being part of the burner community. Though similar and sharing many aspects, the nuances between the two might lead to different outcomes. Secondly, the time frame for the transformative experiences was not specified when choosing the sample population. Thirdly, data was collected by recording interviews on google meets but due to connection problems there were some cases of data loss.

The validity of the study was increased by having interviewees from a wide variety of backgrounds and countries. All the interviews were conducted in English to avoid any biases and data loss in translation. The interviewees had varying levels of experience in attending burns and the community. The population included interviewees who had been to one burn as a participant and interviewees with more than ten years of being part of the burner community and actively organizing events. The study also included interviewees with varying views on the burner community.

The reliability of the study was decreased by the nature of semi-structured interviews. The additional questions are not included in this thesis for it would be difficult to organize them due to the unique conversation of each interview. Therefore, the interviews of this thesis cannot be fully replicated. Additionally, the age range for the sample population was not defined which makes perfect replication of this study impossible. However, the reliability of this thesis is increased by its thorough and detailed methodology which allows any future replication of this study to follow along the steps presented in chapter 3.

### 5.3 Learning outcomes

In the process of doing the research for this thesis, the author had many learnings emerging. The main one being the abundance of information the author was exposed to on transformative experiences and on the culture of Burning Man. Doing the research for this thesis has expanded the understanding of the author on these topics. The most fruitful part were the conversations the author got to have while interviewing members of the burner community and hearing participants' stories on their personal transformations. The author learned new perspectives on transformative experiences and on the Burning Man phenomenon as well as terminology related to the burner culture. Furthermore, the author was also exposed to the problems in the burner community and the events.

The author revisited previously studied frameworks and got to apply them in practice. Additionally, new theoretical frameworks were learned on the course of this thesis. The author learned to construct a theoretical framework from previous theories and apply it in use while planning the semi-structured interviews and during the data analysis process connecting the findings to the framework. The author learned about the best practices in qualitative research and how to conduct semi-structured interviews. While preparing for the interviews, the author learned about the ethical considerations a researcher must have when conducting a study. Furthermore, the author learned to analyze data through the five-phase process of qualitative data analysis (Bingham 2023).

The author had to rush the schedule of the thesis due to a misunderstanding in communication. Regardless, the author was able to finish the thesis in the updated schedule. Due to the number of new concepts the author found the workload of the thesis to be overwhelming from time to time. However, with active communication with the thesis advisor, the author was able to move through any blockages.

The author has learned about the general processes of doing research such as narrowing down a topic, choosing objectives, creating research questions, choosing the methodology and the best practices of academic writing. Conclusively, the author has learned to stay persistent with the process even when it feels challenging.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Full list of interview questions

#### Full list of interview questions

- What is your name?
- How many burns have you attended?
- Can you briefly describe me your journey with Burning Man?
  - When did you attend your first burn?
  - What made you want to go?
  - How did you first hear about it?
  - What is your current role in the burner community?
  - Did you have any expectations before you went to the burn?
- Can you describe me your transformative experience / transformation journey through Burning Man?
- What do you think induced your transformation?
- How would you describe the physical environment of the burn(s) you have attended?
- Is there a lot of differences in the physical environment between the burns you have attended?
- What are the similarities in the burns you have attended?
- Did the physical environment of the burn induce your transformation? If so, how?
- What kind of contrast did you find in the physical environment to your environment in the default world?
- What aspect of the physical environment has been the most memorable to you? Why?
- How do you think this contrast is achieved?
- What makes the environment of a burn immersive? Why?
- What kind of interaction did you have with your physical environment?
- What makes Burning Man an authentic experience to you?
- How would you describe the social atmosphere / the psychological environment of the burn(s) you have attended?
- Did you feel like it was easier for you to be yourself at a burn than in the default world? If so why?
- Did you discover new aspects of yourself? If so what do you think allowed you to do that?
- Did you feel like the bar to interact with people was lower than in the default world? If so why?
- Do you feel like attending a burn helped you find community? If so why?
- Is there any specific principle that you would associate with the transformation you have experienced? If so which one and why?
- Do you think Burning Man and it's regional events are optimal environments for transformations? If so, why?