



Transformative Service Research and Well-being in Urban Collective Spaces: Testing a New Model

Transformative Service Research e bem-estar em espaços coletivos urbanos: testando um novo modelo

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Received: 14.12.2025; Revisions required: 17.04.2026; 14.07.2026. Accepted: 31.07.2026

Abstract

Urban public squares are everyday service settings with the potential to transform citizens' well-being, yet they remain largely absent from Transformative Service Research (TSR). This study aims to develop and validate a model of the antecedents of personal transformation and intention to return in urban collective spaces, using the public squares of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, as the empirical setting. Drawing on TSR and on the urban green space literature, the model integrates perceived quality, experience, mindfulness, learning and well-being as drivers of transformation and revisit intention. Survey data from 2,062 square users were analysed with partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). All fifteen hypothesised relationships were supported: perceived quality and mindfulness enhance experience and learning, which foster well-being and, ultimately, personal transformation and the intention to return. Theoretically, the study extends TSR to mundane, non-commercial public services and offers context-specific measures for squares. Managerially, it shows that investments in infrastructure, safety and experiences that stimulate affective memory and learning can improve citizens' health, engagement and healthier lifestyles.

Keywords: Transformative Service Research, well-being, urban collective spaces, user experience, personal transformation, intention to return.

Resumo

As praças públicas urbanas são cenários de serviço cotidianos com potencial de transformar o bem-estar dos cidadãos, mas permanecem praticamente ausentes da *Transformative Service Research* (TSR). Este estudo tem como objetivo desenvolver e validar um modelo dos antecedentes da transformação pessoal e da intenção de retorno em espaços coletivos urbanos, tendo como campo empírico as praças de Belo Horizonte, Brasil. Com base na TSR e na literatura sobre espaços verdes urbanos, o modelo integra qualidade percebida, experiência, mindfulness, aprendizagem e bem-estar como direcionadores da transformação e da intenção de revisita. Dados de 2.062 usuários de praças foram analisados por meio de modelagem de equações estruturais por mínimos quadrados parciais (PLS-SEM). As quinze hipóteses foram suportadas: qualidade percebida e mindfulness ampliam a experiência e a aprendizagem, que promovem o bem-estar e, em última instância, a transformação pessoal e a intenção de retorno. Teoricamente, o estudo estende a TSR a serviços públicos cotidianos e não comerciais e oferece medidas específicas para praças. Gerencialmente, mostra que investimentos em infraestrutura, segurança e experiências que estimulem memória afetiva e aprendizagem podem melhorar a saúde e o engajamento dos cidadãos.

Palavras-chave: *Transformative Service Research*; bem-estar; espaços coletivos urbanos; experiência do usuário; transformação pessoal; intenção de retorno.

1. Introduction

Parks, forests, gardens, and squares are recognised as vital elements in enhancing the quality of life within urban settings. Urban green spaces facilitate both direct and indirect interactions with nature, which positively influence physical and mental health, ameliorate stress, and promote a sense of well-being. Furthermore, these verdant environments contribute to increased social cohesion and place attachment, and to the encouragement of outdoor activities (Kim, Rupprecht & Furuya, 2018). By understanding the transformative impacts of these areas on citizens as consumers, we can potentially increase these benefits and create even more positive urban environments.

Beyond their ecological and landscape functions, urban green spaces can also be understood through a service lens. Public squares are freely accessible, everyday services provided by municipalities and co-produced with citizens: they combine a physical servicescape (infrastructure, safety, cleanliness), social encounters, and leisure, cultural and learning opportunities. In this sense, squares serve as "third places" where social support and restorative experiences are exchanged (Rosenbaum, 2006). Framing squares as service settings allows the mechanisms by which they affect citizens' lives to be examined using the conceptual apparatus of service research, in particular, Transformative Service Research.

A primary objective among scholars who explore and conceptualise well-being is to influence the factors that can ensure it is a collective phenomenon. Within this framework, the focus of Transformative Service Research (TSR) is on generating or transforming an individual's well-being through services that reduce overall distress and pain points during service consumption (Nasr & Fisk, 2019; Ostrom et al., 2010).

For such transformation to occur, services must promote significant experiences, such as a sense of belonging, personal growth, or emotional fulfilment. As contemporary consumers prioritise values, meanings, and holistic experiences in their service engagement (Akarsu, Foroudi & Melewar, 2020), these significant experiences are crucial. This transformation may be facilitated through co-



creation processes, such as sharing, donating, or partitioning access to goods and services (Hamari & Koivisto, 2015). In this vein, the investigation of changes through the utilisation of squares as communal urban spaces aligns with the shift from an experience-based economy to a transformation-based economy, wherein memorable experiences evolve into transcendent ones that enduringly alter an individual's life (Neuhofer, Celuch & To, 2020; Pine & Gilmore, 2011; Kirillova, Lehto & Cai, 2017).

Three streams of literature converge on this topic, and each leaves an important question unanswered. First, TSR has produced a substantial body of knowledge on how services shape consumer and societal well-being, but its empirical settings have concentrated on healthcare, financial services, social enterprises and services for vulnerable consumers (Anderson et al., 2013; Ostrom et al., 2010; Blocker & Barrios, 2015); ordinary, non-commercial public services such as squares have rarely been examined as transformative service settings. Second, research on transformative experiences in tourism and leisure has emphasised extraordinary contexts, such as festivals, wellness tourism and long-haul travel (Kirillova et al., 2017; Neuhofer et al., 2020; Voigt, Brown & Howat, 2011), leaving open whether the repeated, mundane use of everyday urban spaces can also produce lasting personal change. Third, the urban green space literature robustly documents associations between such spaces and health or well-being (De Vries et al., 2013; White et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2018), yet it typically treats these spaces as environmental amenities rather than as service encounters, and seldom models the psychological mechanisms, such as experience, mindfulness, learning, that link perceived quality to well-being, transformation and revisit behaviour. In addition, measurement instruments in this stream were mostly developed for parks and larger green areas, not for public squares.

A complementary systematic search in Web of Science, Scopus, Spell and the CAPES Periodicals Portal, combining the terms "urban green spaces", "urban gardens" and "public squares" with Transformative Service Research, corroborated this scarcity: after screening 405 records for relevance, methodological soundness and recency, only two studies connected these fields. The first, by Gough and Accordino (2013), examined public gardens as partners in sustainable community development in the United States. Drawing on a national survey and 96 interviews with garden and government officials, the authors show that these green spaces deliver services that improve neighbourhoods and community well-being, converting underused land into valuable green infrastructure, yet remain largely unrecognised by local governments and by the community development literature. The second, by White et al. (2017), used a large English sample to demonstrate that different types of exposure to natural environments (neighbourhood greenness, frequency of visits and specific visits) are associated with different components of subjective well-being, namely its evaluative, eudaimonic and experiential dimensions. Both studies, therefore, treat green spaces as providers of services that enhance well-being, but neither models the service mechanism by which this occurs nor tests it empirically at the user level. Taken together, the literature has established that green spaces benefit well-being and that services can transform lives, but it has not yet integrated these insights into a single, empirically tested model of how the perceived quality of squares and the experiences lived in them translate into learning, well-being, personal transformation and the intention to return.

Consequently, the research question of this study is: *What factors explain personal transformation and intention to return in urban collective spaces?* The aim is to develop and validate a model delineating the antecedents of Personal Transformation and Intention to Return in the squares of Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

The study offers three theoretical contributions to TSR. First, it extends TSR beyond commercial and healthcare settings to mundane, freely accessible public services, showing that transformative value can emerge from everyday micro-encounters with urban space. Second, although the constructs employed are individually established, the originality of the study lies in integrating them into a single transformative chain (quality → experience/learning/mindfulness → well-being → transformation → revisit intention), thereby specifying the mechanisms through which service settings generate uplifting change. Third, it proposes and validates measurement items specifically worded for the context of public squares, providing an instrument that future TSR and urban studies can reuse and refine.

2. Theoretical background, conceptual model and hypotheses

Transformative Service Research is the branch of service research dedicated to understanding how service entities and consumers interact to create "uplifting changes" in individual and collective well-being and in value creation (Anderson et al., 2013, Cunha, Diéguez & Khalifi, 2025). Its central premise is that services are not neutral exchanges: their design, quality, and the experiences they afford can either erode or enhance consumers' physical, psychological, and social well-being (Blocker & Barrios, 2015; Anderson & Ostrom, 2015). Applied to urban collective spaces, this premise implies that the attributes of a square (its perceived quality), the experiences and states of attention it enables (experience and mindfulness), and the competencies it fosters (learning) should serve as resources that build well-being and, over time, personal transformation. This transformation sustains continued use of the service (intention to return). The hypotheses below are developed under this TSR logic: each relationship represents one link in the chain through which a public service setting converts resources into well-being outcomes.

Although most approaches address the conservation level of physical resources and the intrinsic qualities of space (Brindley et al., 2019), Zhang et al. (2017) measure quality in terms of facilities, amenities, natural features, incivilities, accessibility, and



conservation. Likewise, De Vries et al. (2013) include accessibility, conservation, and natural characteristics in their green area quality scale, in a manner akin to Zhang et al. (2017), along with variety, colourfulness, and overall perceived impression, as well as the presence of shelter, absence of litter, safety, and precise arrangement of facilities. For Akpinar, Barbosa-Leiker and Brooks (2016), the quality of an urban green area may be assessed in terms of aesthetics, cleanliness, conservation, spaciousness, shading, light, and visibility or openness.

Various authors list factors used to measure squares' quality. For example, Van Herzele and Wiedemann (2003) highlight culture and history as factors of quality and attractiveness of green areas. There is a relationship between the characteristics of a green area and its use by individuals, indicating that squares can have different vocations (Grahn, Stigsdotter & Berggren-Båring, 2005). From a TSR perspective, these attributes are the operant and operand resources that the public service provider makes available; users' perception of them is the first step in the transformative chain.

Thus, considering the context of square visitations and the literature mentioned above, it is understood that the construct of Perceived Quality for this research encompasses the following main dimensions: (1) Primary and Supplementary Infrastructure, (2) Accessibility, and (3) Vocation. Inspired by such research, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Primary Infrastructure is a dimension of Perceived Quality.

H1b: Supplementary Infrastructure is a dimension of Perceived Quality.

H1c: Accessibility is a dimension of Perceived Quality.

H1d: Vocation is a dimension of Perceived Quality.

Like the Perceived Quality construct, the Experience construct encompasses a plurality of factors that vary depending on the environment in which it is analysed (Bascur & Rusu, 2020). Products, services, and spaces shape experience, given the particular elements inherent to their embedded contexts. Thus, a variety of dimensions can be considered when this construct is analysed.

According to Pestana, Parreira and Moutinho (2020), motivation is the energy or emotional intensity an individual feels when faced with a situation, or alternatively, the psychological force that drives action (Chan, 2018). Regarding tourist motivation, Pizam, Neumann, and Reichel (1978), as cited in Vujičić et al. (2020), define it as the needs that predispose a person to a particular activity.

Consumption has transcended the boundaries of functional thinking about acquiring products and services, directly impacting people's identity perception. As Brandini (2008) explains, people consume as a ritual of participation (even if purely psychological) in groups to which we wish to belong and to differentiate ourselves from others, with whom we do not wish to be or appear associated. In this sense, consuming transcends mere utilisation of the thing to the expression and moulding of oneself (Carù & Cova, 2003). Thus, the consumption of a particular product/service may involve, in addition to its practical applicability, the process of constructing and expressing the individual's identity, shaping the subject's perception of themselves and the environment in which they live. Gonzalez (2008) states that spaces that carry local importance play a significant role in identity construction, and the search for tourist experiences, the so-called existential traveller, arises mainly due to the desire for self-affirmation (Gonzalez, 2008). From this perspective, it is essential to consider experience as a construct that can impact the construction of the identity of the individual who experiences it.

Regarding memory, there is no uniform definition, as it encompasses many facets (Walsh & Ungson, 1991; Akgün, Keskin & Byrne, 2012). Memory refers to the retention of an individual's activities, behaviours, and experiences (Lai et al., 2021). Based on evidence from Sociology, Neuropsychology, and Psychology, affective memory stems from emotional experiences or events that are incorporated into memory unconsciously (Akgün et al., 2012). In the tourism context, tourists' experiences produce memories of the places, products, and services they consume at destinations. People share memorable experiences as a way to narrate themselves to others (Pereira & Hor-Meyll, 2017). Moreover, affective memories are also responsible for increasing the intentions to return to the visited place (Pereira & Hor-Meyll, 2017). Given this, it is reasonable to propose, in this research, the multidimensionality of the Experience construct. Based on this, the following hypotheses are admitted:

H2a: Motivation is a dimension of Experience.

H2b: Identity is a dimension of Experience.

H2c: Affective Memory is a dimension of Experience.

According to Irvine, Warber, Devine-Wright and Gaston (2013), the quality of contact with nature promotes positive spiritual and emotional experiences. Perceived quality cannot be measured only in objective terms that describe the characteristics of the green area, such as size, nature, or quietness, because quality is also a judgment that the individual makes; that is, quality is perceived and interferes with the experience the individual will have (Fongar, Aamodt, Randrup & Solfeld, 2019). If quality can be understood



as a level of excellence, then this perception shapes the experiences associated with the characteristics of the place under evaluation. To evaluate the use and quality of an urban green area, researchers need to understand its relationship with experiences in depth by investigating behaviour, satisfaction, sociability, and the psychological aspects of the individuals who frequent these spaces (Gehl, 2013). In TSR terms, perceived quality serves as the enabling resource upon which value-in-use is co-created: the better the resources offered by the square, the richer the experiences users can construct with them (Anderson et al., 2013). From the above, it follows that:

H3: Perceived Quality positively impacts Experience.

Ormrod (2004) concludes that exposure to materials of profound difficulty/complexity complicates the learning process. Conversely, well-organised, legible, and stimulating environments lower the cognitive cost of engaging with a setting and offer interpretive cues, such as signage, historical monuments, cultural references, and organised activities, that support informal and incidental learning. In consumption settings, experience quality has been shown to include a cognitive-learning component: knowledge is acquired precisely while the individual engages with the service (Chang & Horng, 2010). Evidence from tourism likewise indicates that well-designed experiences produce short- and long-term environmental and cultural learning (Ballantyne, Packer & Falk, 2011). From a TSR perspective, learning is one of the well-being resources that a service setting can deliver; the quality of the setting determines how accessible this resource is (Anderson et al., 2013). Hence, the higher the perceived quality of a square, that is, its infrastructure, accessibility and vocation (e.g., historical or cultural value), the more it is expected to enable users to learn about the city, its history and its public spaces. With this in mind, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Perceived Quality positively impacts Learning.

Experiences from tourism and leisure activities contribute positively to well-being (McCabe & Johnson, 2013), particularly its eudaimonic dimension (Knobloch, Robertson & Aitken, 2017; Smith & Diekmann, 2017). Smith and Diekmann (2017) conclude that tourism experiences can have long-lasting repercussions for subjective well-being, possibly even mitigating health issues. Research by Wood et al. (2017) examines whether the recreational, natural, and sports functions provided within parks differ in their association with positive mental health; the results indicated that all three functions positively correlate with positive mental health. Howell et al. (2011) report a consistent association between connection with natural environments and social and emotional well-being. Based on this, the following hypothesis is admitted:

H5: Experience positively impacts Well-being.

TSR also suggests that consumption has a high potential for social transformation (Anderson & Ostrom, 2015). For example, by offering transformative experiences, tourism services promote cultural (Gonçalves, 2008) and environmental learning in both the short and long term (Ballantyne et al., 2011). They can improve the disposition to learn communication and behavioural skills (Pan, 2012). As previously mentioned, experiences of contact with green areas have been associated with better performance in academic and child contexts, and richer, more engaging experiences provide the situations in which informal learning takes place. Considering the context of squares as green areas, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Experience positively impacts Learning.

Mindfulness, a term of Buddhist origin often translated as "full attention," has been shown to be significantly related to the tourist experience (Loureiro, Stylos & Miranda, 2020). Kang and Gretzel (2012) assert that the greater the attention devoted, the better the experience, whether learning, enjoyment, or escapism. Regarding the relevance of the Learning construct, research by Walker and Moscardo (2014) provides evidence supporting the premise that an association exists between the two: a tourist experience lived with full awareness can transform values and behaviours. Mindfulness has also proven to be an essential tool in mental health care. Its practice contributes to the development of skills and enables a better understanding of experiences and the thoughts and feelings associated with them, thereby mitigating suffering and promoting the individual's well-being (Rybak, 2013).

The increasing investment in mindfulness in service organisations demonstrates its benefits in providing differentiated consumption experiences and competitive advantage. It exerts significant influence on the overall experience (Kang & Gretzel, 2012; Lee & Kim, 2018; Loureiro et al., 2020) and on learning (Walker & Moscardo, 2014); mindfulness is associated with the consumer's intention to return and, consequently, with loyalty (Lee & Kim, 2018). From the above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H7: Mindfulness positively impacts Experience.

H8: Mindfulness positively impacts Learning.

H9: Mindfulness positively impacts Well-being.

H10: Mindfulness positively impacts the Intention to Return.



The learning process, as a form of personal transformation, is defined as an interaction between the individual and the environment and is not necessarily linear or static (Vygotsky, 1994). Therefore, it can be conceptualised as a transformation process through which the involved parties and the environment are modified (Darley, 2018). This is consistent with transformative learning theory, according to which learning changes frames of reference, understood as the assumptions through which individuals interpret the world, and therefore constitutes personal transformation itself (Mezirow, 1997). According to Anderson and Ostrom (2015), the most significant benefit of transformative services is the enhancement of well-being. If these transformations are accompanied by real learning, individuals achieve a deeper level of well-being. Thus, it is assumed:

H11: Learning positively impacts Personal Transformation.

The experiences individuals undergo shape their well-being in the moment (Tharani, Husain & Warwick, 2017). In this sense, if the environment and the learning derived from it are positive, this helps maintain well-being at the same level. Various studies demonstrate the efficacy of learning in improving overall well-being: research by Panayotoff (1993) and Manheimer and Snodgrass (1993), among others, shows a direct relationship between continued learning and the sense of well-being among older adults, and Chaves (2011) reports a significant relationship between the effective learning of university students and their perceived well-being. A theoretical rationale reinforces this evidence: learning builds competence and environmental mastery, which are core psychological needs whose satisfaction underpins eudaimonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Within TSR, services that develop consumers' skills and literacy are precisely those expected to improve well-being (Anderson et al., 2013). Thus, this relationship, already supported in other environments, is projected to the context of squares and public parks:

H12: Learning positively impacts Well-being.

Natural environments are associated with improved health and well-being (White et al., 2017). Subjective well-being can be measured as a single construct (SWB), which includes life satisfaction; meaningful or worthwhile activities, corresponding to the eudaimonic dimension; and happiness or anxiety, representing the hedonic dimension of well-being (White et al., 2017). When it comes to well-being related to transformation, numerous findings of physical, mental, and spiritual renewal are included. Although there is a higher frequency of experiences of well-being linked to transformations and attitude changes, these experiences also manage to change people by refining their sense of appreciation and pride in a particular culture, heritage, and the region's environment (Clark et al., 2014). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H13: Well-being positively impacts Personal Transformation.

Furthermore, well-being tends to be associated with the behavioural intention of (1) wanting to revisit the place that brought it about (Kim & Ritchie, 2014) and (2) continually seeking that renewal of the mind, caring for and maintaining one's health through situations that contribute to physical, psychological, spiritual, and social well-being (Voigt et al., 2011). Various studies show the relationship between well-being and behavioral intention in different areas: Chiu et al. (2013), Jamaludin et al. (2016), and Wang, Lin and Liao (2010) link the sensation of well-being to the reuse of services and to consumer loyalty. These conclusions may fit the context of squares and parks. Thus, it is hypothesised:

H14: Well-being positively impacts the Intention to Return.

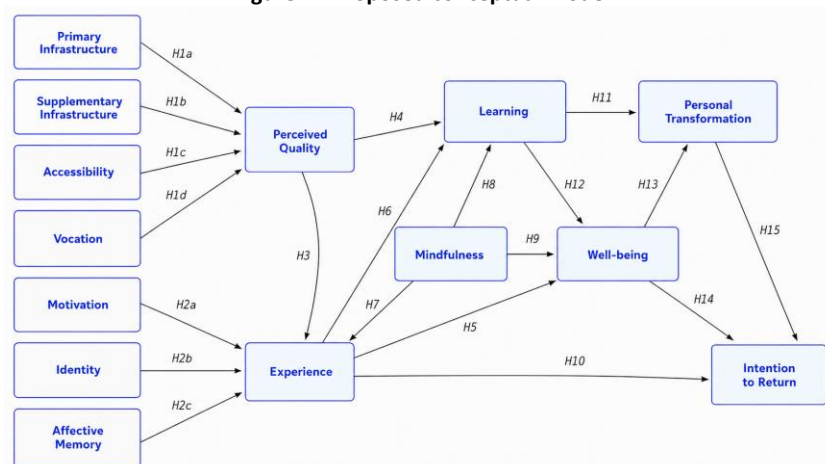
From the perspective of psychotherapy, transformation (understood here as personal transformation) concerns the processes of enduring change in an individual's behaviour, thoughts, feelings, motivations, and responses (Brubacher, 2006). Regarding public spaces, Soulard, McGehee and Stern (2019) see the possibility for transformative encounters in physical environments, as these are places where tourists and residents interact. Ganglmair-Wooliscroft and Wooliscroft (2014) and Zakariya, Harun, and Mansor (2015) also recognise the importance of understanding how spaces affect people, since design and infrastructure can promote transformative encounters. Given the above, it is necessary to consider that personal transformation, with its feelings, sensations, and new perspectives, influences the intention to visit and revisit the services and spaces that promote it. In this regard, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H15: Personal Transformation positively impacts the Intention to Return.

Drawing on Transformative Service Research, the proposed model therefore assumes that users first evaluate the quality of the urban space, which shapes their experience. These experiences, energised by mindful engagement, facilitate learning, and learning and experience together enhance well-being. Well-being and learning ultimately foster personal transformation, and transformation, together with well-being and mindfulness, strengthens users' intention to revisit the space. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model and its fifteen hypotheses.



Figure 1 - Proposed conceptual model



Source: own elaboration.

3. Methodology

To achieve the aim of this research, we conducted a quantitative, descriptive study. The approach was cross-sectional (each sample unit responded only once), and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to test the model. The research universe comprises all residents who have visited at least one square in Belo Horizonte at least twice a month. The sample was selected by convenience and is non-probabilistic; thus, it is not possible to generalise the results.

The questionnaire items (Table 1) are novel and were specifically worded for the context of public squares. Their development followed the classic scale-development paradigm of Churchill (1979): (i) the domain of each construct was specified based on the literature reviewed in Section 2; (ii) items were generated from an extensive qualitative study, published separately, in which 93 users of ten squares of Belo Horizonte were interviewed in situ and the transcripts were submitted to content analysis (Gosling, 2021), whose emerging categories (motivations, accessibility, infrastructure, safety, memory, learning, well-being, transformation) grounded the wording of the items; (iii) the items were assessed for content and face validity by expert judges and pre-tested; and (iv) the refined pool was submitted to Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) prior to the PLS-SEM estimation (Section 4), as recommended when scales are newly developed (Hair, Celsi, Money, Samouel & Page, 2015).

We do not claim that the resulting scales are exhaustive. The dimensions and items retained are those that emerged as salient in the qualitative stage and survived psychometric purification; other motives for visiting a square (e.g., attending organised events or accompanying children's school activities) and other quality attributes may exist and are acknowledged as an avenue for future refinement of the instrument (see Section 6).

The scales were 11-point Likert-type (0 to 10), a format theoretically supported by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). The total number of indicators in the study was 49, and the valid sample comprised 2,062 cases, yielding about 15 cases per variable.

PLS-SEM was preferred over covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) for four reasons. First, the model is complex, comprising seven latent variables, two of which are second-order constructs, and fifteen structural relationships; PLS-SEM handles such complexity efficiently (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt & Ringle, 2019). Second, the aim of the study is the extension of TSR theory to a new context and the prediction of key target constructs (Personal Transformation and Intention to Return) rather than the confirmation of a consolidated theory, which is precisely the situation in which PLS-SEM is indicated (Hair et al., 2019; Ali, Rasoolimanesh, Sarstedt, Ringle & Ryu, 2018). Third, the data did not meet the assumptions of multivariate normality, a requirement that PLS-SEM does not impose. Fourth, the measurement items are newly developed, and PLS-SEM is more robust in early stages of scale usage (Hair et al., 2019).

The second-order constructs (Perceived Quality and Experience) were estimated using a two-stage approach: in the first stage, latent variable scores for the first-order dimensions were obtained; in the second stage, these scores were used as indicators of the higher-order constructs. The two-stage approach was chosen because it yields more precise parameter estimates than the repeated-indicators approach when higher-order constructs are embedded in structural relationships and when their dimensions have unequal numbers of indicators, as is the case here (Sarstedt, Hair, Cheah, Becker & Ringle, 2019).

**Table 1 - Survey items**

Motivation	<i>I usually visit squares in Belo Horizonte to ...</i> M1 ... relax. M2 ... walk by myself. M3 ... break my daily routine. M4 ... walk with company (people or pets). M5 ... enjoy free entertainment.
Accessibility	<i>I usually choose a square in Belo Horizonte because of its ...</i> ACCESS1 ... proximity to my home or workplace. ACCESS2 ... ease of access. ACCESS3 ... proximity to wherever I happen to be when I decide to go.
Facilities (1)	<i>When I arrive at a square in Belo Horizonte, I pay attention to whether it offers ...</i> IF1 ... ample open space. IF2 ... visitor safety. IF3 ... cleanliness. IF4 ... adequate night-time lighting. IF5 ... places to sit. IF6 ... a playground for children. IF7 ... suitable areas for sports or physical exercise. IF8 ... nearby public restrooms. IF9 ... nearby shops or food-and-beverage options.
Mindfulness	<i>While I am in a square in Belo Horizonte ...</i> MIND1 ... I feel at peace. MIND2 ... I can concentrate on what I am doing. MIND3 ... I think more clearly. MIND4 ... I pay close attention to everything around me.
Identity	<i>For me, visiting squares in Belo Horizonte ...</i> ID1 ... is part of being a resident of the city. ID2 ... is part of my daily life. ID3 ... gives me a sense of familiarity.
Affective Memory	<i>Visiting squares in Belo Horizonte reminds me of ...</i> MEMAF1 ... the squares I visited as a child. MEMAF2 ... the squares I visited during my school years. MEMAF3 ... the squares I visited with my family. MEMAF4 ... happy moments spent in other squares I have visited.
Vocation	<i>In Belo Horizonte, I prefer squares that ...</i> VOC1 ... have tourist appeal. VOC2 ... are located in my neighbourhood. VOC3 ... possess historical or cultural value. VOC4 ... offer a variety of leisure options.
Learning	<i>In Belo Horizonte, I prefer squares that ...</i> AP1 ... allow me to learn new things. AP2 ... encourage me to take care of public property. AP3 ... help me learn more about the city's public spaces. AP4 ... help me learn more about the city's history.
Well-being	<i>Visiting squares in Belo Horizonte ...</i>



	BEE1 ... makes me more patient. BEE2 ... helps me balance my emotions. BEE3 ... makes me feel good about myself. BEE4 ... reinforces my personal beliefs.
Personal Transformation	<i>Visiting squares in Belo Horizonte helps me ...</i> TP1 ... keep physically active. TP2 ... value my free time more. TP3 ... pursue more sustainable consumption habits. TP4 ... seek healthier lifestyle habits.
Intention to Return	<i>Regarding squares in Belo Horizonte ...</i> INT1 ... I intend to discover new squares. INT2 ... returning to squares is one of the first leisure activities that comes to mind. INT3 ... visiting squares is one of my main leisure choices in the city. INT4 ... I plan to continue visiting squares regularly.

Source: the authors. Note: (1) Following the EFA, the Facilities factor was split into Primary Infrastructure and Supplementary Infrastructure.

4. Results

Regarding respondent demographics, 61.7% identified as female, 37.3% as male and a small share (0.6%) selected the "other" gender option. In terms of education, 58% have at least some university experience, whether completed or not; 14% hold a postgraduate qualification, and only 2% have completed elementary education. Income is concentrated in the two-to-five-minimum-wage bracket (43.1%). The sample is skewed toward younger adults: 38.7% are between 18 and 25 years old, which is consistent with their relatively high level of schooling. The research team did, however, strive to reach a broader age range, so the findings are informative but still not generalisable because the sample was obtained through convenience sampling. Recognising that parenthood can influence how often people use public squares, the survey also aimed for marital-status diversity. Just over half of the respondents (52.1%) are single, while 19.3% have school-age children and are either married or in a long-term partnership (16%) or separated (3.3%).

Initially, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted by "layers" (antecedents, mediators, consequences) to refine the newly developed items prior to the PLS estimation (Hair et al., 2015). In the EFA of the antecedents, Experience and Perceived Quality, the factorial solution revealed that Perceived Quality comprises four dimensions: Motivation, Accessibility, Basic Infrastructure, and Supplementary Infrastructure. Experience comprises three dimensions: Identity, Affective Memory, and Vocation. The seven factors explain 66.03% of the variance extracted from the data, which is adequate (Hair et al., 2015). It was necessary to remove the following items due to low communality: M4, IF1, and VOC2, and M2 and IF7 because they did not load on any factor.

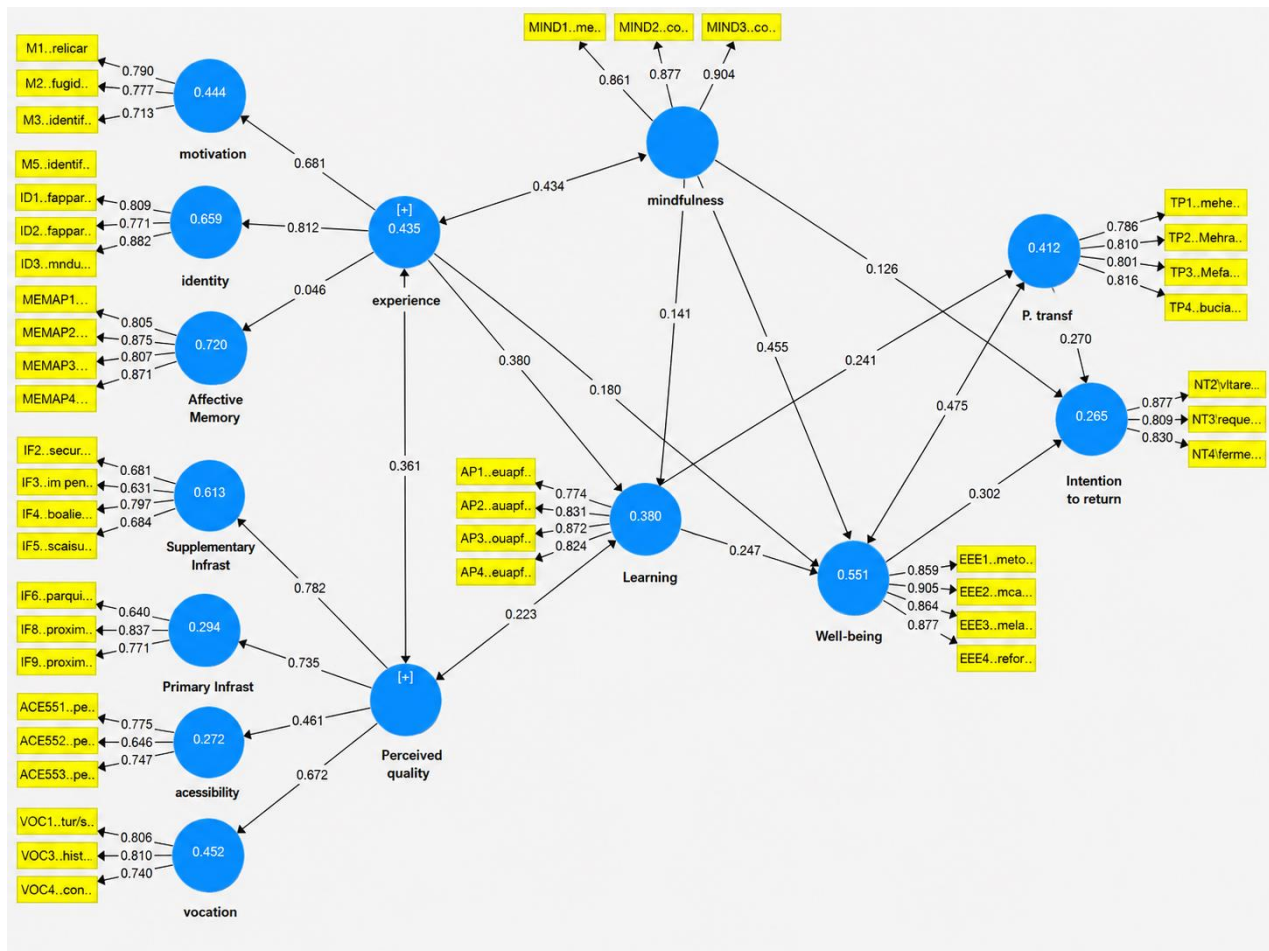
The second exploratory factor analysis addressed the mediating constructs, namely Learning, Well-being, and Mindfulness, all of which met the required criteria. As expected in the proposed model, the three mediating constructs explain 74.1% of the variance extracted from the data. MIND4 had to be removed due to communality below 0.5. The third exploratory factor analysis comprised the consequential constructs: Personal Transformation and Intention to Return. All requirements were met, except that INT1 needed to be removed due to communality below 0.5. As anticipated in the proposed model, the two consequential constructs explain 70.46% of the variance extracted from the data.

4.1 Measurement model (outer model)

Given the study's sample size ($N = 2,062$), the lack of normality in the data, and the presence of second-order constructs, Partial Least Squares (PLS) structural path modelling was used, as justified in Section 3. SmartPLS 3.0 software was used to operationalise the modelling, and all constructs were modelled as reflective. Perceived Quality and Experience were modelled as second-order constructs comprising their respective subdimensions and estimated via the two-stage approach. Figure 2 illustrates the PLS model run, termed the measurement model.



Figure 2. Measurement model



Source: SmartPLS output.

Cronbach's alpha was estimated to assess the reliability of the scales by analysing their internal consistency. According to Hair et al. (2005, 2014), the value of Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0 to 1, with values between 0.60 and 0.70 being acceptable in exploratory research; values between 0.70 and 0.90 are satisfactory. Convergent validity was evaluated using external loadings (>0.708 , or >0.65 in an exploratory study) and the average variance extracted (AVE) per construct. Netemeyer, Bearden and Sharma (2003) suggest that AVE estimates should be higher than 0.45. Table 2 shows that Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and AVE were well-adjusted for all (reflective) constructs.

Table 2. Reliabilities and convergent validity

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Accessibility	0.702	0.833	0.625
Learning	0.846	0.897	0.685
Well-being	0.889	0.923	0.750
Experience (2nd order)	0.843	0.878	n/a
Identity	0.759	0.862	0.675
Primary infrastructure	0.787	0.863	0.613
Supplementary infrastructure	0.617	0.796	0.568
Intention to return	0.827	0.897	0.743
Affective memory	0.873	0.913	0.724
Mindfulness	0.856	0.912	0.776
Motivation	0.657	0.814	0.593



Perceived quality (2nd order)	0.778	0.829	n/a
Personal transformation	0.832	0.888	0.664
Vocation	0.701	0.834	0.667

Source: PLS output. Note: decimal separators standardised and the Learning composite reliability corrected from a typographical error (0.987) to 0.897.

Discriminant validity was confirmed through the Fornell and Larcker procedure: the square root of each construct's AVE (diagonal of Table 3) exceeds its correlations with all other constructs.

Table 3. Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion)

Construct	ACC	LEA	WB	ID	PI	SI	INT	AM	MIN	MOT	PT	VOC
Accessibility (ACC)	0.790											
Learning (LEA)	0.201	0.828										
Well-being (WB)	0.209	0.558	0.866									
Identity (ID)	0.303	0.498	0.581	0.822								
Primary infrastr. (PI)	0.245	0.254	0.217	0.251	0.783							
Supplem. infrastr. (SI)	0.144	0.356	0.204	0.257	0.407	0.754						
Intention to return (INT)	0.195	0.451	0.552	0.604	0.204	0.178	0.862					
Affective memory (AM)	0.249	0.451	0.391	0.502	0.220	0.363	0.338	0.851				
Mindfulness (MIN)	0.234	0.444	0.680	0.526	0.270	0.207	0.466	0.370	0.831			
Motivation (MOT)	0.226	0.428	0.465	0.425	0.289	0.268	0.426	0.354	0.538	0.770		
Personal transf. (PT)	0.247	0.506	0.610	0.486	0.253	0.204	0.517	0.346	0.499	0.403	0.815	
Vocation (VOC)	0.131	0.450	0.259	0.322	0.263	0.400	0.292	0.325	0.272	0.391	0.291	0.792

Source: PLS output. Diagonal (in bold) = square root of the AVE.

4.2 Structural model (inner model)

According to Hair et al. (2014), the first step is to evaluate the structural model's collinearity, which should be less than 5. The sample showed no collinearity issues for endogenous constructs or indicators. As a second step, the structural model should be evaluated for its explanatory ability. For this, the results from PLS-SEM are assessed using the determination coefficients (R^2) for each construct and the significance of the path coefficients (Hair et al., 2014). The coefficients of determination should be evaluated using thresholds of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67, representing weak, moderate, and substantial values, respectively (Henseler, Ringle & Sinkovics, 2009; Hair et al., 2014). Most constructs had moderate or substantial adjusted R^2 , indicating adequate model quality (Table 4).

In terms of second-order constructs and their respective dimensions, Accessibility is the dimension least explained by Perceived Quality ($R^2 = 21.2\%$), likely because other variables influence it in citizens' perceptions, such as transportation, parking, and public authority responsibility. On the other hand, both Basic and Supplementary Infrastructure are explained by Perceived Quality to more than 50%, highlighting that infrastructure is an essential attribute for citizens. Experience encompasses all its dimensions, with Affective Memory accounting for more than 70%, underscoring the relevance of this attribute to citizens' experiences in squares. In terms of endogenous constructs in structural relationships, nearly all were explained by their antecedents by about 40% (Table 4). Lastly, all relationships (hypotheses) predicted in the model were supported by the data (Table 4), consistent with the literature reviewed.

Table 4. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Structural path	R^2 adj.	t-value	Sig.	Result
H1a	Quality → Basic infrastructure	0.613	61.528	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H1b	Quality → Supplementary infrastructure	0.540	57.216	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H1c	Quality → Accessibility	0.212	14.408	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H1d	Quality → Vocation	0.451	34.097	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H2a	Experience → Motivation	0.464	42.962	0.000	<i>Supported</i>



H2b	Experience → Identity	0.659	91.382	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H2c	Experience → Affective memory	0.719	107.481	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H3	Quality → Experience	0.455	19.676	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H4	Quality → Learning	0.388	16.970	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H5	Experience → Well-being	0.561	12.294	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H6	Experience → Learning	*	14.774	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H7	Mindfulness → Experience	*	23.199	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H8	Mindfulness → Learning	*	14.589	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H9	Mindfulness → Well-being	*	39.464	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H10	Mindfulness → Intention to return	0.364	19.133	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H11	Learning → Personal transformation	0.411	14.646	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H12	Learning → Well-being	*	10.860	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H13	Well-being → Personal transformation	*	18.801	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H14	Well-being → Intention to return	*	15.820	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
H15	Personal transformation → Intention to return	*	9.699	0.000	<i>Supported</i>

Source: adapted from software output. Note: * the adjusted R^2 of each endogenous construct is reported once, in the first row in which the construct appears as the dependent variable.

The overall quality and the predictive capacity of the structural model were also assessed (Hair et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2019). First, Cohen's effect sizes (f^2) were computed for all structural relationships, with 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 denoting small, moderate and large effects (Hair et al., 2014). The largest effects were observed for Mindfulness → Well-being ($f^2 = 0.363$), Well-being → Personal Transformation ($f^2 = 0.269$), Mindfulness → Experience ($f^2 = 0.268$) and Quality → Experience ($f^2 = 0.265$), followed by moderate effects for Experience → Well-being ($f^2 = 0.155$), Learning → Personal Transformation ($f^2 = 0.142$), Well-being → Intention to Return ($f^2 = 0.141$) and Personal Transformation → Intention to Return ($f^2 = 0.102$). The remaining relationships showed small effects (Mindfulness → Learning, $f^2 = 0.096$; Learning → Well-being, $f^2 = 0.088$; Experience → Learning, $f^2 = 0.062$; Quality → Learning, $f^2 = 0.027$), except Mindfulness → Intention to Return ($f^2 = 0.001$), whose contribution is structurally negligible despite its statistical significance. The effects of the second-order constructs on their dimensions were large (Quality: Basic Infrastructure, $f^2 = 1.586$; Supplementary Infrastructure, $f^2 = 1.470$; Vocation, $f^2 = 0.875$; Accessibility, $f^2 = 0.269$; Experience: Affective Memory, $f^2 = 2.406$; Identity, $f^2 = 1.936$; Motivation, $f^2 = 1.551$). Second, the predictive relevance of the model was examined through the blindfolding procedure (omission distance = 7), based on cross-validated redundancy: the Stone-Geisser Q^2 values of all endogenous constructs exceeded zero (Well-being, $Q^2 = 0.418$; Intention to Return, $Q^2 = 0.268$; Personal Transformation, $Q^2 = 0.265$; Learning, $Q^2 = 0.247$; Experience, $Q^2 = 0.103$), indicating that the model has predictive relevance for each of them (Hair et al., 2014). Finally, the relative predictive contribution of each predictor (q^2 effect size) was computed by re-estimating the model with and without each relationship (Hair et al., 2014): Experience made a medium relative contribution to the prediction of Learning ($q^2 = 0.15$) and Mindfulness the largest contribution to Well-being ($q^2 = 0.26$), with the remaining relationships making small contributions (q^2 between 0.01 and 0.13). Taken together, these indicators show that, in addition to explaining a substantial share of the variance in its endogenous constructs, the model is predictive, thereby reinforcing the robustness of the reported results.

5. Discussion

This study asked what factors explain personal transformation and intention to return in urban collective spaces. The results provide a clear answer: perceived quality and mindfulness set a transformative chain in motion: they enrich the experience lived in the square and the learning it affords, which build well-being and, ultimately, personal transformation and the intention to return. Beyond the statistical support for all fifteen hypotheses, three sets of findings deserve interpretation in light of previous research.

First, among the dimensions of Perceived Quality, Basic Infrastructure was the most strongly explained ($R^2 = 61.3\%$), and among the dimensions of Experience, Affective Memory stood out ($R^2 = 71.9\%$). The prominence of infrastructure is consistent with the green-space quality literature, which identifies safety, cleanliness, lighting and facilities as decisive attributes of use (Zhang et al., 2017; Akpinar et al., 2016), and with the qualitative stage of this project, in which users conditioned their visits on conservation and safety (Gosling, 2021). The prominence of affective memory extends findings on memorable tourism experiences, in which memory drives revisit intention (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Pereira & Hor-Meyll, 2017), to a mundane, everyday setting: squares appear to serve as repositories of biographical and family memories, thereby charging ordinary visits with emotional meaning.



Second, mindfulness proved to be a powerful engine of the model, with its strongest effects on well-being ($t = 39.46$). This result aligns with evidence that attention to the present moment amplifies the benefits of contact with nature (Howell et al., 2011) and improves the quality of consumption experiences (Kang & Gretzel, 2012; Lee & Kim, 2018; Loureiro et al., 2020). It suggests that the restorative capacity of squares is not automatic: it depends on the attentional state the space can induce, an insight with direct design implications, which is discussed below.

Third, the strongest driver of Personal Transformation was Learning, and transformation, in turn, reinforced the intention to return. This pattern is theoretically meaningful. It corroborates transformative learning theory, for which durable personal change occurs precisely through learning that alters frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997), and it supports the TSR premise that services which build consumers' competencies deliver deeper well-being outcomes (Anderson et al., 2013; Blocker & Barrios, 2015). Importantly, these effects emerged in an ordinary public service used repeatedly in daily life, and not in the extraordinary tourism contexts where transformative experiences are usually studied (Kirillova et al., 2017; Neuhofer et al., 2020). This suggests that transformation can accumulate through frequent micro-encounters with well-designed everyday spaces, a mechanism complementary to the intense, episodic transformation described in tourism research.

5.1 Theoretical implications

Three theoretical contributions follow, connected to the gaps identified in the Introduction. First, the study extends the empirical domain of TSR from healthcare, financial and commercial settings to free, non-commercial public services, showing that the TSR premise that service quality and design produce uplifting change holds in urban collective spaces. Second, the study specifies and validates the mechanism of this change: an integrated chain (quality $\rightarrow$ experience/learning, energised by mindfulness $\rightarrow$ well-being $\rightarrow$ transformation $\rightarrow$ revisit intention) that previous studies had examined only in fragments. In doing so, it connects TSR with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) and with the eudaimonic view of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Smith & Diekmann, 2017), clarifying why learning occupies a central position in transformative service settings. Third, the study delivers a validated, context-specific measurement instrument for public squares, including second-order structures for Perceived Quality and Experience, that future TSR, urban leisure and place-management studies can adopt and refine.

5.2 Practical implications

The findings offer concrete guidance for municipal governments, urban planners and tourism/leisure agencies. Because Basic Infrastructure is the strongest facet of quality, investment priorities should focus on safety, cleanliness, nighttime lighting, seating, restrooms, playgrounds, and exercise areas; these are the attributes by which citizens judge the service. Because Affective Memory dominates the experience, managers should protect and communicate the historical and symbolic identity of squares (bandstands, monuments, traditional fairs) and program events that create shareable, memorable moments for families, since memories formed today are the driver of tomorrow's visits. Because mindfulness fuels well-being and revisits intention, design should also afford calm: green shading, quiet zones, and programming (e.g., yoga, tai chi, and guided contemplative activities already offered in some squares) that help users be present. Because learning transforms, squares can be deliberately curated as informal learning environments, with heritage signage, cultural events, environmental education, and workshops, thereby converting leisure time into civic and personal development. Finally, the model provides a monitoring tool: municipalities can periodically measure the constructs to evaluate interventions. Healthier, more engaged citizens also mean lower public health expenditure, which strengthens the economic case for investing in squares.

6. Conclusions

This study developed and validated a model of the antecedents of Personal Transformation and Intention to Return in urban collective spaces, grounded in Transformative Service Research and tested with 2,062 users of Belo Horizonte's squares. All fifteen hypothesised relationships were supported: Perceived Quality (formed by primary and supplementary infrastructure, accessibility and vocation) and Mindfulness enhance Experience (formed by motivation, identity and affective memory) and Learning; these, in turn, build Well-being; and Well-being and Learning foster Personal Transformation, which, together with Well-being and Mindfulness, strengthens the Intention to Return. The research question is thereby answered: it is the perceived quality of the space and the mindful, memory-laden, learning-rich experiences lived in it that explain why everyday urban spaces can transform citizens and draw them back.

The study has limitations that circumscribe its conclusions and open avenues for future research. Data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, when restrictions on leisure and public gatherings may have influenced both the use of squares and the relationships studied; replication in a post-pandemic period is warranted. The sample was obtained via convenience sampling, which limits generalisation; probabilistic sampling designs and replications in other cities and cultural contexts would test the model's external validity. The design is cross-sectional and based on self-reports; longitudinal designs could capture how transformation accumulates over repeated visits, and objective indicators (e.g., physical activity or health data) could complement



perceptions. The scales, although carefully developed and validated, do not claim exhaustiveness: future studies may enrich the item pools (e.g., by adding motivations such as attending organised events), test invariance across groups, and confirm the factorial structure using independent samples. Finally, future research could examine moderators (frequency of use, companionship, neighbourhood characteristics), compare ordinary and extraordinary transformative contexts, and explore negative experiences, such as perceived insecurity or social exclusion, that may attenuate the transformative chain identified here.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), through a Research Productivity Grant (process no. 311418/2017-1).

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

During the revision of this manuscript, the author used a generative artificial intelligence tool (Claude, Anthropic) exclusively at the revision stage, to support language editing, formatting and the reorganisation of previously written content. The conceptual development, data collection, statistical analyses and interpretation of results are entirely the author's own work. The author reviewed, edited and validated all content produced with the assistance of the tool and takes full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest: None

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