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When words become difficult: a critical reflection of the 'MeBox' method in understanding senior travellers' responses to loss

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Multiple dimensions of our experiences such as visual, embodied and sensory experiences cannot always be easily expressed in words. Traditional qualitative methods may struggle to access these deep-rooted complex and emotional aspects. Tourism scholars have called for innovative methodologies to unravel layers of diverse meaning in phenomena. This article critically reflects on a visual tool called the 'MeBox'. It was adopted in our study to explore senior travellers' responses to loss following a major life event. The 'MeBox' method enabled participants to express embedded and tacit knowledge to reflect on their lived experiences. We critically review the 'MeBox' methodology, and provide practical learnings for scholars who may want to adopt this method as a means to understand lived experiences that are difficult to express in words.

Keywords: *'MeBox', creative research methods, senior travellers, loss and major life events, visual, objects*

1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism scholars have called for a deeper, richer engagement and reflective consideration around the use of creative methods to understand tourism phenomena. Creative and visual methods have been extensively used in many other disciplines, and indeed are widely acknowledged for their value in knowledge production (Fraser/al Sayah 2011). In our study, we wanted to explore the lived experiences of seniors who had travelled after facing major life events. We were specifically interested in their responses to loss in the context of travel. To facilitate the study, the 'MeBox' method was adopted to explore these lived experiences as a response to loss and to unravel richer meanings in a sensitive and participant-generated manner. Major life events can profoundly impact an individual's daily routine both negatively and positively (Engberg et al. 2012). These events tend to occur more frequently throughout the latter stages of an individual's life journey. For example, major life events can include children leaving

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home, retirement, becoming grandparents, a major change in one's financial situation, change of residence, death of a loved one, divorce or separation, becoming disabled or facing a life-threatening illness (Achenbaum 2011; Bennett 1997; Engberg et al. 2012; Hooyman/Kramer 2006; Lanza 1996; Molzahn et al. 2012; Weenolsen 1988).

Considering the nature of the topic, we also wanted our participants to be involved in and gain some benefits through the use of a reflexive dialogue framework rather than endorsing the 'researchers as epidemics' approach (Cockburn-Wootten et al. 2018), wherein research becomes an 'infectious disease' that takes over the host participant and their communities. Indeed, critical tourism, feminist and indigenous scholars have noted that traditional academic methods employed in research tend to privilege the academy, certain types of knowledge and relationships, and that all of these tend to provide career benefits to the scholar at the expense of participants' lives (Smith 2012). As Smith (2012: 1) notes, traditional one-way research is 'one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary … it stirs up silence … bad memories'. She argues that the way that this knowledge is collected during the research process does not facilitate agency or consider the emotional context of relationships; instead, it empowers the academic at the expense of the participant.

Similarly, critical tourism scholars have also noted that research processes tend to focus on what the academic prioritises, disseminates in academic language and channels, all of which privileges the academy more than the participants' lives (Cockburn-Wootten et al. 2018; Higgins-Desbiolles 2009). This orientation to the design, process and issue of representation shaped our planning, design and relationships with our participants (Wise/Stanley 1983). Other scholars have also illustrated how some people may face difficulties when expressing their deep-seated emotions and recounting past events for a research study (Schmidt 2005; Willson et al. 2013; Zinnbauer et al. 1999). Failure of words to articulate and describe an experience can create frustration for research participants. As Scarles (2010: 919) notes, 'sounds of silence can arise as respondents abandon attempts at verbal expression … such silences can inevitably create discomfort, awkwardness and fractures in conversation.'

For all these reasons, the purpose of this paper is to provide researchers and practitioners who wish to adopt the 'MeBox' method with insights into how it can help them understand lived experiences that may be difficult to express in words. The following section introduces and provides an overview of the 'MeBox' methodology. That section is followed by a discussion of how the method was applied to our study and some of the key results that illustrate the richness of this method. These key results are presented under two themes: (1) Seeing comes before words; and (2) Discovering additional layers of meaning. These two themes highlight how the 'MeBox' method enabled our research participants to express embedded and tacit knowledge by reflecting on their lived experiences of travel as a response to loss. The final sections of this paper provide a discussion and concluding thoughts for tourism researchers and practitioners who are interested in researching lived experiences that are not always easily communicated through words.

2 OVERVIEW OF THE 'MEBOX' AS A VISUAL METHOD

Researchers can adopt a wide variety of visual methods, including drawings, electronic media, material objects, photography and ethnographic film (Alfonso et al. 2004; Cross et al. 2006; Frith/Harcourt 2007; Gibbons 2013; Pauwels 2002; Rakić/Chambers 2010; Rich et al. 1998). Visual research methods have been used across different

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disciplines, including sociology (Pauwels 2002; Wills et al. 2016), health (Baker/Wang 2006; Radley/Taylor 2003), geography (Rose 2000; Schwartz 1996) and psychology (Clark 2010; Segalo 2018). For instance, in their study of bereaved parents, Riches and Dawson (1998) noticed that respondents would often refer to photographs and objects to communicate their child's story. Gould similarly saw the increased depth of insight in his students' work when visuals were used. For example, a roller coaster was chosen to represent the grief experience, 'because the feelings of grief are always changing suddenly' (Gould 1994: 71). His findings suggested that images can help people share grief experiences because his class bonded emotionally, and they felt free to share their difficult stories. Green and Young (2015) also highlighted that engaging in creative visual expression can overcome frustrations and provide possible benefits for people, especially after experiencing a major life event, such as cancer.

Previously, tourism scholars called for alternative creative methods to work with more emotional, sensitive and complex topics in a reflexive manner that can also disrupt assumptions and enhance the participants' perspective (Ramanayake et al. 2019; Wilson/Hollinshead 2015). For example, co-creative visual tools offer opportunities to enrich our understanding and address this gap as they provide 'a valuable methodology for researchers seeking a deeper exploration of socially constructed tourism realities that are complex and sometimes sensitive' (Wengel et al. 2020: 180). These tools allow researchers and participants to work in a co-creative way that creates spaces for shared analysis and interpretation of the knowledge being produced. Creative and visual tools have the advantage of revealing tacit inductive meanings or emotional, sensitive aspects of our experience that might be due to trauma. Furthermore, participatory and creative visual methods are often used when researching vulnerable groups. For example, Rydzik et al. (2012) used creative and participatory visual methods to explore the experiences of female migrants working in the hospitality sector in the United Kingdom, and found that these creative and participatory visual methods led not only to richer knowledge creation but also empowered the women.

In proposing creative and participatory visual methods, scholars have argued that the methods need to be understood in context; that they need to be used with other complementary methods; and that they may miss sensory information that could be relevant and enrich the data. For instance, work by Scarles (2010) evaluates the barriers and challenges of using visual methods in tourism. Drawing on Pink's (2007) earlier work, Scarles argues that the sensory aspects of tourism have been missing from data collection methods. In research by Gibbons (2013) on participants with chronic illness, participants believed that photographs do not show their real experiences of illness. Indeed, the convention of photographs displaying positive and happy emotions tends to restrict the breadth of emotions that a person can embody (Siibak 2009). Consequently, the present study used a visual research method called the 'MeBox' as a physical memory tool that enabled participants to lead the discussion of their experiences at their own pace and in their preferred way.

Our approach draws on similar qualitative studies that used physical memory prompts to facilitate discussion with participants around sensitive issues (FitzPatrick et al. 2019; Gibbons 2013). Creative expressions, objects and metaphors 'serve as embedded framing and orienting devices' that can challenge researchers' assumptions and help them understand emotional and complex topics (Tracy/Redden 2015: 239). 'MeBox' is a branch of visual research methods that helps participants discuss their experiences and provide a therapeutic role for them (Byme et al. 2016). The method

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draws on elements from co-creative, narrative and metaphorical data practices to discuss the embodied experiences of participants. The 'MeBox' method discussed in this paper was created by Gibbons (2010) in a research project that aimed to explore participants' experiences of chronic illness.

The 'MeBox' method (Gibbons 2010) involves three interviews: an initial introductory meeting; a second meeting in which participants start to create their 'MeBox' from researcher-provided objects; and a final session where participant-provided objects are used to complete the 'MeBox'. When designing this method, Gibbons had to consider the energy levels of participants and the available time they had to give to the research. Therefore, the time between interview sessions was determined by the needs of the participants. Gibbons left roughly two to three months between the sessions. However, she observed in her research that the time gap of a few months between the interviews created issues as some participants had forgotten the reasons for choosing objects. Furthermore, she noted that this forgetfulness implied that the 'MeBoxes' had been put away during this period. As a result, much of the momentum and enthusiasm that had been established with many of the research participants during the first 'MeBox' interview was lost. Next, we discuss how we have adopted the 'MeBox' method to explore the lived experiences of senior travellers as a response to loss following a major life event.

3 APPLICATION OF THE 'MEBOX' METHOD IN UNDERSTANDING SENIOR TRAVELLERS' RESPONSES TO LOSS

In this section, we discuss the application of this method in our study. We used the 'MeBox' method to explore the lived experiences of 12 travellers over the age of 65 as a response to loss after facing major life events. Explorations of lived experiences are commonly associated with phenomenological approaches (Fendt et al. 2014; Van Manen 1990). We too adopted the phenomenological paradigm to focus on the nature of participants' primarily lived experiences of travel as a response to loss. The 12 participants had faced major life events such as life-threatening illness, major disability, death of a spouse or loved one and divorce or separation.

When answering our questions during an initial meeting, we noticed that participants had some difficulties in finding words to describe their lived experiences of travel. These experiences confirmed that we needed to look beyond verbal face-to-face interviews when exploring this complex and sensitive phenomenon. This realisation prompted us to consider alternative methods that could meet the aims of this study; delve beyond the limitations of words and recall; and, importantly, provide some emotional benefits to the participants as they recounted their lived experiences of travel as a response to loss. As such, we supplemented in-depth phenomenological face-to-face interviews with the 'MeBox' method. We adapted the method to enrich the interviews as well as to provide memory prompts and opportunities for reflective, inductive insight.

In our study, we conducted an initial conversation. Then we conducted the first in-depth interview. Finally, we employed the 'MeBox' method in the second interview. Conducting a face-to-face in-depth interview before the 'MeBox' session was important in this study because the consolidation of visual and verbal narratives helps a researcher gain a richer understanding of participants' experiences (Pink 2007). We conducted a preliminary conversation with each participant to explain the research before they signed the consent forms. In the first in-depth interview, we directed

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Figure 1 MeBoxes

broad, open-ended questions (Giorgi 2009). These open-ended questions also encouraged participants to discuss different aspects of their lived experiences (FitzPatrick et al. 2019).

To prepare for the second in-depth interview, the first author brought various gift boxes and objects to the location. From their study of using the 'MeBox' method, FitzPatrick et al. concluded that this initial step of starting to create the 'MeBox' from researcher-provided objects eased the participants into the method. At the beginning of the second in-depth interviews, the first author asked participants to choose their 'MeBox' from a selection of coloured cardboard boxes (Figure 1). This second interview was then conducted in two parts. First, the participant created a 'MeBox' from researcher-provided objects and, second, the 'MeBox' was completed from the participant-selected objects. As such, in addition to the objects provided by the researchers, participants were encouraged to bring their own objects to the second in-depth interview. The instructions were broad: participants were asked to bring any objects that they decided were personally significant and felt represented their lived experiences of major life events and travel (as in FitzPatrick et al. 2019).

The chosen box then became the participant's 'MeBox' into which they would put their objects and describe them to the first author. The participants selected particular objects related to their lived experiences. According to FitzPatrick et al. (2019: 172), 'when participants respond to "MeBox" objects as direct stimuli or memory prompts, the objects can elicit the detailed oral descriptions valued by visual researchers'. However, the participants were free to attribute their own meanings to the researcher-provided objects. The objects the first author initially chose came mainly from his own home, and we offered a variety of objects (Gibbons 2010). Our decision to select the 12 'MeBox' objects (Figures 2–13) was based on the following five aspects:

1. insights gained from three pilot interviews;
2. discussions with senior citizen clients during the first author's volunteering work;
3. previous literature (Johnson/Wijdicks 2018; Willson 2010);

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4. previous studies that had employed the 'MeBox' method (Elphingston-Jolly 2012; FitzPatrick et al. 2019; Gibbons 2013);
5. our own reflective thinking of our lived experiences.

Our research participants were asked to look at the researcher-provided objects and select any that reflected their lived experiences, and to put these into their 'MeBox'. Once they had finished selecting objects they were asked to pick out objects one by one from their 'MeBox' and recount their lived experiences related to the object. In this way, we discussed participants' lived experiences through the researcher-provided objects. The following section presents the 12 researcher-provided objects and the reasoning behind choosing them.

Example of researcher-provided object	Reason for choosing the object
Figure 2 Broken pot	We chose the broken pot because Gibbons (2010) also used a broken pot to represent a loss.
Figure 3 Candle	We chose this because, according to Johnson and Wijdicks (2018), a candle symbolises light in the darkness, a remembrance, a prayer for the dead and celebration of major religious holidays.
Figure 4 Leaf	In the first in-depth interview session, many participants expressed spiritual needs related to their travels in natural environments. Therefore we thought to add a leaf as a means to reflect nature and being away from one's everyday environment.
Figure 5 Photo frame	We added in an empty photo frame as Elphingston-Jolly (2012) used one in her 'MeBox' method to represent the family because it brought back memories of family, relationships and major life events.
Figure 6 Diary	Previous studies have suggested that people may find it difficult to express their spirituality (Willson et al. 2013) and so notes, poems and music were used as a way for people to talk about their lived experiences of spiritual needs and travel (Willson 2010). We used the diary in a similar way to represent schedules, events, thoughts and feelings related to the participants' experiences of major life events and spiritual needs during travel.

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Figure 7 Padlock

According to Elphingston-Jolly, the lock and the key reflected something sacred or something secret in her study. We also added the padlock to our 'MeBox' to represent spirituality as the key to wellbeing in later life.

Figure 8 Globe

During the first author's volunteering work, he noticed that some senior citizens had a globe in their home. They told him that looking at this globe reminded them of their past travel memories. For this reason, we included the globe to reflect our participants' travel memories in various countries.

Figure 9 Stone

The first author has a friend who collects stones whenever she travels around the world. She told him that these stones help in terms of her spiritual healing. We thought the stone could represent participants' spiritual healings.

Figure 10 Feather

During the pilot interviews, two participants brought along a feather to represent the peacefulness that they get in their mind through spirituality. We added a feather to the 'MeBox' to represent peacefulness and feelings of solitude through travel.

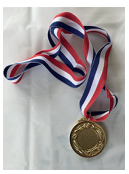

Figure 11 Medal

Elphingston-Jolly used a medal in her 'MeBox' research to represent achievements in the participant's life. We also thought we could use a medal in our list of researcher-provided items.

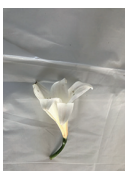

Figure 12 Flower

During the first author's volunteering work, one person expressed their experiences around the impermanence of life in terms of nature and animals. That idea influenced our inclusion of this flower with its fading spots in the researcher-provided items as a representation of the impermanent aspects of life.

Figure 13 Toy car

One of our pilot interview participants brought a toy car to the interview to represent physical disabilities, so we added a toy car to represent various disabilities in old age and mobility experiences related to ageing.

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At the end of the first half of the second interview, the first author invited the research participants to explain the objects they had brought. These included a Bible, bag, statue, mug, vase, pendant, shell, figurine, certificate, fridge magnet and blown glass, as well as stones, pieces of pottery, travel souvenirs, gloves, travel photos, flowers, candles, prints, prayer beads and newspaper cartoons to reflect their lived experiences. During these two sessions, the first author asked the participants questions such as: What objects reflect or connect with your major life event? Could you please explain? What objects reflect your travel experiences? Could you please explain? Could you tell me a story about what is happening in this photograph? At the end of the interview, the 'MeBox' objects were photographed individually and as a group to capture each research participant's lived experiences visually and to facilitate the data interpretation and analysis. The interview ended with a discussion of the next stage of the method, where the first author would brainstorm ideas with the research participant about creating their hypertextual selfscape image.

The final step of the 'MeBox' method is creating hypertextual selfscape images. To more clearly communicate this vital step, we will present a hypertextual selfscape image of one of our participants. The photographed 'MeBox' objects were used to begin creating the hypertextual selfscape images. The participants' hypertextual selfscape images are based on their 'embodied sensory experience' along with 'what participants look at [in] their life and decide what experience to represent and narrate' in relation to their other 'different experiences' and 'memories' (Gibbons 2010: 49). The hypertextual selfscape image has 'the potential to enable the viewer to gain a level of access to the lived experience' (Gibbons 2013: 28).

In her study, Gibbons (2013) used images of the participants' 'MeBox' objects to create a hypertextual selfscape image that could add information that was still missing in the participants' photographs. However not all the 'MeBox' objects were chosen to co-create the hypertextual selfscape image, as they do not lead to the understanding of the central experience of the research participants (Gibbons 2010). Joyce, one of our research participants, faced a major illness in her life. Joyce's hypertextual selfscape image (Figure 14) represents the significance of her travel experiences in India which exposed her to many cultures that were completely different from those she was familiar with.

Joyce got these objects when she was travelling in India. It was quite tricky for her to articulate what the objects symbolise. She stated that they were part of the whole experience she had in India, which was a life-changing experience. These objects together thus represent her travel experiences in India. According to Joyce:

> It challenged my beliefs; it challenged how I live; it challenged what I thought when I saw how other people lived, which are quite profound. Lots of the experiences I have had there have been life-altering, and they have informed how I am in life now.

One key story Joyce recounted was of when she was travelling in Southern India: she visited a mountain; she got to the top, but the worst thing was trying to come down. She felt she wanted somebody just to come and pick her up and carry her down. According to Joyce, this travel experience was powerful and came at a point in her life where she needed a lot of courage after major surgery: 'I have had lots of insights while I was there, that I find myself every now and again, I'll be like that, this and it can just take me to another level in my life.' Travelling in India offered Joyce a physical challenge to overcome the psychological and emotional uncertainties about her physical capabilities.

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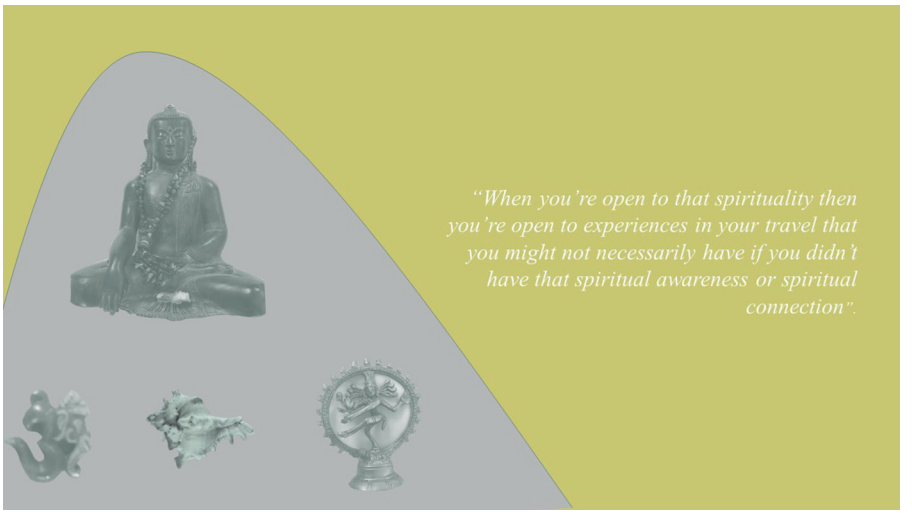

Figure 14 Joyce's hypertextual selfscape image

Thus, the hypertextual selfscape images represented broader meanings for the research participants' lived travel experiences as a response to loss that went beyond the objects alone. The selfscape process helped the research participants' voices and representations to be heard in our research; it fulfilled the phenomenological principle of giving voice to participants (Schmidt 2005; Willson et al. 2013). The research participants were also asked for any misinterpretations or if they wanted any changes made to their hypertextual selfscape image (Gibbons 2013). The hypertextual selfscape images therefore remain an outcome of the participants' voices rather than the researchers' viewpoints (Gibbons 2013). Next, we discuss the results of adopting the 'MeBox' method in our study.

4 RESULTS

It is important to note that topics such as bereavement, life-threatening illness, divorce and separation are extremely sensitive issues for research participants. Furthermore, these topics are still significantly under-represented in the tourism literature – in contrast to the issue of disability, which has become a burgeoning research area within tourism scholarship (Ramanayake et al. 2018). A key challenge around conducting research in this area is the selection of methods that could be adapted to discuss and examine the issue in a sensitive manner that satisfies both institutional and moral ethical expectations of the researcher–participant relationship (Cockburn-Wootten et al. 2018). Further exploration of methods for use with research participants experiencing issues such as bereavement, major illness and divorce would bridge this current gap within tourism research. Importantly, co-creative and visual tools such as the 'MeBox' method allow research participants to express and reflect upon their lived travel experiences following a loss in their own time, manner and words. The images and metaphors used in 'MeBox' allowed 'a form of thinking and language through which we understand or experience one thing in terms of another' (Lakoff/Johnson 2003: 7). The results

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discussed below illustrate that adopting this particular method enabled this topic to be sensitively discussed; and, in doing so, we deepened our understandings of the participants' lived experiences of travel following their loss.

4.1 Seeing comes before words

The 'MeBox' objects facilitated research participants' ability to express the richness and meanings of their lived experiences. In effect, the tool allowed 'participant-driven understandings and cocreated knowledge' (Wengel et al. 2020: 165). Berger also pointed out the importance of non-verbal tools, commenting that 'seeing comes before words'. For example, the 'child looks and recognises before it can speak' (Berger 1972: 7). In the same way, the 'MeBox' objects first facilitated moments of reflection for our participants; they then used the objects to express their lived experiences of major life events and travel as a response to loss. For example, the broken pot (Figure 2) reminded Jane of a recent major life event in which she had an eye removed because of cancer. In contrast, for Mark, the broken pot reminded him of the pottery he had seen while travelling overseas. Mark suggested that pottery is very important when we travel because we can often learn history through pottery.

Research participants suggested that a 'MeBox' object was personal to them because it was tangible – they could see it. Green and Young (2015) also suggested that visual media allowed their research participants another voice within themselves to speak when words are not enough. Riches and Dawson (1998) suggested that memory is created and preserved around physical objects and spaces. Therefore, photographs and other artefacts provide detailed records around which conversational remembering can take place. Similarly, the 'MeBox' objects in our study allowed our participants to describe their experiences in richer emotional detail. For example, Sylvia said that whenever she sees a white feather she thinks of her now deceased son. The diary reminded Matthew of his late wife because she kept full diary notes of every place they travelled to. Matthew thus reflected on his lived experiences using the diary. For example, he said that his wife was sick for some time before she died. According to Matthew, she said: 'Look, I've had a wonderful marriage, wonderful life and I've turned 70. We are only promised three score and ten, what more do I want?'

Louise added a figurine to her 'MeBox'. She expressed her feelings about her lost sister through the figurine because it had belonged to her sibling. Significantly, social science scholars have also attested that pictures and similar objects can provide personal insights and social relationships (Grady 2008). Reflecting on the results of our study, we felt the 'MeBox' objects facilitated participants' expressions of the embodied and emotional meanings they attached to their travel experiences as a response to loss. Using this method demonstrated the usefulness/contribution of this approach to tourism research that focuses on emotional, sensitive and embodied experiences. For example, Amanda had to face a major life event (cancer). She included two candles in her 'MeBox'. These were labelled 'love' and 'relax', and they had been given to Amanda when she was diagnosed with cancer. These two candles helped Amanda to express her experiences of travel. The candles helped her describe emotions such as the opportunities that travel gave her as a meaningful period of separation from her major life event; in her words travel had allowed her to 'meet new friends' and bring 'love' and 'relaxation' back into her life.

Matthew also added a medal to his 'MeBox' because it reminded him of two things about his travel experiences in Singapore following the death of his wife. First, the

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ribbon attached to the medal represented the amount of time he spent in the museum in Singapore. Second, the medal reminded him of the people he saw in the country. Matthew saw people of his own age group sweeping the streets and, in his words, 'when he talked to them, they were happy, they are working, and they are useful. That experience stuck in his mind.' Other objects that brought back memories and helped participants express their travel experiences in relation to loss were also discussed. For instance, Mark added a flower and a feather to his 'MeBox' as these objects reminded him of his connection to the natural world he saw on his travels. Victoria added a picture of Australia to her 'MeBox' and used it to elaborate on key aspects of her travel experiences, especially where she was able to meet people from various backgrounds. She found it interesting to observe the differences between people and how they continued on with their life. Victoria expressed that travelling in Australia gave her a lot of confidence as she was able to live independently. Louise added a stone to her 'MeBox' as this reminded her of her experiences walking the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage trail. As she explained, 'One of the things you do on the Camino is to carry a stone to represent your burdens, and you lay it down at the Cruz de Ferro, which is the highest point of the whole pathway.' So, the stone came to reflect more than an inanimate object; rather, it reflected the weight of her loss and her long, challenging journey.

Kathryn added a fridge magnet to her 'MeBox' that she had purchased after walking the Camino after the death of her husband. She expressed her lived travel experiences and emotions through this 'simple everyday' object. This magnet reminded her of the things she learnt from being a pilgrim and how she tries to apply those lessons to everything she does. All these objects are inexpensive, everyday objects, and, overall, the participants used them to aid their emotions, memories and current lives in a therapeutic manner during the research process. The toy car reminded Jane of travelling in Chicago after suffering eye cancer, where she felt life is not always peaceful and that it brings changes and major life challenges like cancer. Similarly, Louise's stone represented significant moments during her Camino de Santiago walk. Rosaline wanted to put the leaf and stone together as one object 'because to me, when I travel, I feel very connected to nature, as I do anyway and I am not a person to travel to cities, to spectacles'.

The 'MeBox' objects in our study supported the research participants as they talked about their major life events and travel experiences as a response to loss through the presence of the event or experience in the form of an object. Riches and Dawson (1998) suggested in their study that bereaved parents were eager to show photographs of their children, and the conversation was eased by the presence of their children in the form of artefacts, snapshots, schoolwork, trophies, artwork and newspaper cuttings. In the same way, the use of 'MeBox' objects provided a way for our research participants to reflect on their lived experiences before expressing their thoughts to us in words. Overall, we felt the 'MeBox' method allowed participants to think in ways other than the verbal mode and to conceptualise their lived experiences of major life events in the context of travel.

4.2 Discovering additional layers of meaning

One's lived experiences might be happy or traumatic, and cannot always easily be expressed in words (Gibbons 2013). Talking through the 'MeBox' objects increased the research participants' reflexivity as they were able to express deeper reflective

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comments about experiences of loss. As the first author differed significantly from the research participants in terms of gender, age, race, religion and culture, these differences might have created difficulties in developing understanding and relationships, and ultimately gaining deeper insightful data from participants (Ramanayake 2020; Scarles 2010). The 'MeBox' method may have helped overcome any potential subjective differences, and facilitated understanding and shared meanings between this author and the participants. The 'MeBox' method minimised boundaries between researcher and participant as the objects helped illustrate their lived experiences (Ramanayake 2020; Scarles 2010).

We found that the researcher-provided objects comfortably eased participants into the method and helped them start creating their 'MeBox' (FitzPatrick et al. 2019). The participants confirmed at the end of the research data collection stage that the 'MeBox' objects provided by the first author researcher were helpful for reflectively thinking about various aspects of their major life events, travel and lived experiences, and elicited meaning and memories. The research participants' experiences were communicated more broadly through the further development of the hypertextual selfscape images to capture the wider sense of their experiences. As the singular 'MeBox' objects do not tell the whole story about their lived experiences, it is their connection and relationship when they are all put together that illustrates to the researcher the participants' growth, self-efficacy and understandings (Gibbons 2013). The hypertextual selfscape images thus developed and illustrated more layers of the participants' lived experiences. They have 'the potential to enable the viewer to gain a level of access to the [whole] lived experience' (Gibbons 2013: 28). Therefore, hypertextual selfscape images were a way to connect with and illustrate a participant's whole travel story after loss.

In addition, the hypertextual selfscape image creation enabled a broader discussion of the connections that illustrated the unseen associated information about the participants' experiences of major life events. Overall, the consolidation of visual and verbal narratives embedded in the 'MeBox' objects and further development by the hypertextual images enabled us to gain a richer and broader understanding of participants' lived experiences (Pink 2007). For the participants, the 'MeBox' objects and later hypertextual images empowered them to critically reflect on the actual situation that the object represented and, importantly, the broader connective layers of meanings through the hypertextual images regarding their lived experiences of loss. In this sense, we felt that the 'MeBox' method proved to be more effective than traditional data collection methods.

5 DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to provide critical reflections for tourism researchers and practitioners who wish to adopt the 'MeBox' method to understand lived experiences following loss. The results from the 'MeBox' method highlighted two key aspects: 'seeing comes before words' and 'discovering additional layers of meaning'. These two themes illustrated how the 'MeBox' method offers tourism researchers possibilities for considering research relationships and the representation of difficult experiences. The 'MeBox' method deepened our relationships with our research participants and our understanding of their lives. It provided research participants with a sense of agency. They were able to talk about what they deemed significant, and so the 'MeBox' method offered them three things: a creative channel through

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which to explore; opportunities to reflect on their subjective lived experiences; and a means to communicate their ideas sensitively.

We agree with Feighey (2003: 82): that methods such as 'MeBox' offer researchers an opportunity 'to break new ground and … contribute to the further development of our study of the ubiquitous phenomenon of tourism' as they allow both participants and researchers to play an active co-creative role in knowledge creation and the dissemination of data. The 'MeBox' approach embraces the co-creative framework where participant and researcher are actively involved in the creation, understanding and analysis of the phenomenon under investigation. The 'MeBox' method has been applied in different contexts; for example, Elphingston-Jolly (2012) and FitzPatrick et al. (2019) employed it to understand how women used possessions to cope with abusive relationships. In their studies, the 'MeBox' objects facilitated eliciting data from participants about their experiences of domestic violence (FitzPatrick et al. 2019).

Perspectives on lived experiences of major life events and travel in the senior stage of life are significantly under-researched in tourism scholarship. As our world is facing an ageing population, gaining a better understanding of the lived experiences of the senior life-stage is vital for both researchers and research participants. The challenge, however, is how to facilitate the expression of these lived experiences of travel related to major life events such as the death of a loved one, major illness, divorce and separation. This is not always easy for participants. Similarly, Gould (1994: 67) stated that for many – especially those who have experienced significant loss – 'this was really hard, but it made me really get things out and have a long look at them'. The preceding sections of this paper illustrate how our participants used the 'MeBox' objects to represent and talk about major life events and their travel experiences. For example, referring to a broken pot, Jane reported that, after her cancer, she saw travelling as an opportunity to make the most of her limited lifetime; Amanda used two candles to express her experience of facing cancer; and Joyce, following major surgery, explained her experiences through souvenirs from her travels in India.

The 'MeBox' objects provided an opportunity to explore remembered or newly discovered aspects of participants' lived experiences. The participants suggested that involvement in this research after facing major life events such as loss of a loved one, major illness and divorce or separation was meaningful and impactful. Green and Young (2015) also argued that turning to creative expression following a cancer diagnosis is a meaningful and impactful experience for cancer survivors. With the inclusion of the objects in the 'MeBox' session, many of the participants had no trouble remembering their lived experiences because the 'MeBox' images helped them see their experiences visually before talking about them. For example, Amanda explained:

> I can see where I bought it. I can see the people I was with because those objects are very important to me emotionally and spiritually. I think because these are things from the past, from very good friends and had a connection to those sorts of things which are important to me.

In the 'MeBox' method, representations of new knowledge can be co-created using both the researcher-provided objects and the participant-provided objects, and then through the hypertextual selfscape image. Notably, with this method the meaning of the visual stimulus resides with the participant rather than it being a property of the object itself or the researcher's interpretation. Thus, the participant's subjectivity becomes central to the production of knowledge (FitzPatrick et al. 2019; Hogan/Pink 2012). In our study, the 'MeBox' method was highly directed throughout by the

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participants' representations and the inclusion of what they felt was important as regards understanding the research issue. The objects elicited memories and deep emotions, and so brought richer insights into the research. For instance, one of our participants stated:

> I am an object person. So, I found the objects useful and helpful and [was] interested in seeing the variety of objects that you produced here. They were very stimulating. It brought other things to my mind because of how I [had] been thinking when I brought these, and then these other things brought other ideas to mind.

Furthermore, when combined with interview data, 'MeBox' objects and the hypertextual selfscape (Gibbons 2010), they enable a broader representation and shared understanding of participants' lived experiences, more so than could have been gained from relying solely on word-based tools (Gibbons 2013).

6 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper has identified how the 'MeBox' method could be adopted by tourism researchers as a way to understand lived experiences following loss. The method adds to our arsenal of qualitative tools by facilitating the inclusion of participants' voices; by considering the ways through which experiences can be represented; and by helping them express their emotionally embedded lived experiences of loss. For example, this method could be used by tourism scholars seeking to understand the voices of those living with terminal illness and how their families create memorable experiences through travel during their final days. Also, the method could enrich our understanding of the travel experiences for those who have hidden disabilities, whose voices are often muted in scholarship compared to the attention given to travellers with visible disabilities. Finally, it could be used to explore the experiences of younger travellers following loss to contrast with those of seniors reported in this study. Significantly, the 'MeBox' method also enables participants to disseminate knowledge of their experiences that may not easily be expressed in words or through traditional word-based research tools (Cockburn-Wootten et al. 2018; Gillovic et al. 2018; Wengel et al. 2020). The increasing availability of co-creative visual methodologies in other disciplines provides tourism researchers with opportunities for exploring and understanding the interconnected, sensory and embodied richness of our lived experiences. Nonetheless, the use of the 'MeBox' method is not without its challenges; these include the significant time and commitment required from both participants and researchers during the research relationship.

The limitations of this approach are that all involved spent a significant amount of time and commitment in co-creating the 'MeBox' images and hypertextual selfscape images. That said, the results of this paper demonstrate that the 'MeBox' method can be used for emotional embedded experiences, the inclusion of participants' representations and lived experiences, and can provide therapeutic value for them as they reflect on and discuss their travels as a response to loss. A further potential limitation of the method is that research participants may become fatigued with the emotional and reflective aspects of the 'MeBox' process (Annear et al. 2014), so we need to be prepared for this eventuality. Using the method with participants from different cultures/religions would also need careful consideration as each culture and religion has particular ways of reacting to various major life events

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(Kagawa-Singer 1998). The 'MeBox' method is an innovative approach to help researchers gain multi-layered understanding of the lived experience even though it may not always be possible for some participants to express emotions through 'MeBox' objects. The method has the potential to be used across a variety of tourism issues and other experiential studies to deepen our understanding of tourist experiences, especially among travellers whose stories of sensitivity may remain marginalised from existing tourism research. Overall, this article has described the 'MeBox' method and offered critical reflections for future researchers and practitioners who are interested in studying lived experiences that are not always easy to communicate in words.

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