
3 Social interaction in co-creating the tourist experience: An exploratory study of Chinese visitors to Japan

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The objectives of this chapter are to:

- Explore the nature of social interaction as a necessary condition for value co-creation in tourism.
- Address the lack of studies on the role of social interaction in co-creating the tourist experience among tourists from non-Western cultures.
- Investigate how frequently Chinese tourists have social interactions with three groups of social actors: service providers, residents, and other tourists.
- Clarify how Chinese tourists evaluate the importance of social interactions with each of the three groups of social actors.
- Discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings, the limitations of our study, and suggest avenues for further research.

Keywords: co-creation; social interaction; tourism experience

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Introduction

Tourists are increasingly looking for experiences that allow them to actively participate (Campos et al., 2015), and the role of the tourist as a co-creator, or even the sole creator, of the tourism experience is becoming widely recognized among tourism scholars and practitioners (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Rihova et al., 2013; Campos et al., 2015). Some even regard active value co-creation as the most important aspect of the tourism experience (e.g. Boswijk, Thijssen & Peelen, 2007; Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009).

Destinations may be viewed as a space in which tourists co-create their own memorable experiences through social and other interactions (Morgan & Xu, 2009). Following this conceptualization, social interaction among participants is an essential condition for value co-creation. Categories of social actors participating in tourism value co-creation include service providers (e.g., Salvado, 2011; Minkiewicz, Evans & Bridson, 2014), the local community (e.g., Azevedo, 2009; Richards, 2010), and other tourists (e.g., Rihova et al., 2013, 2015; Reichenberger, 2017).

Surprisingly perhaps, previous tourism studies have tended to take social interactions among actors in tourism for granted, and have often treated them as inherently positive. Hence, we feel that an investigation of these basic assumptions of positive social interactions and how they are perceived by tourists is warranted. Furthermore, tourists' perceptions and attitudes towards different types of on-site social actors may lead to different forms of value co-creation. We therefore need to study from the perspective of the tourist how different types of social actors participate in the tourism value co-creation process, and what is the relative impact of each type of social actor on this process.

Literature review

The co-creation of tourist experiences

Since the end of the 20th century, the economies of developed nations have started shifting towards what Pine and Gilmore (1999) call the 'experience economy'. The experience economy designates a shift away from 'modern' economies where consumers merely consume goods and services toward 'post-modern' economies where consumers look for more unique, personalized, hedonic, emotional, aesthetic, or cultural/educational experiences, in the production of which they actively engage. Academic studies are increasingly focusing on the consumer's role as a co-creator of experiences.

Some even argue that it is the very experience of the co-creation itself that consumers desire and value (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2003, 2004; Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003) call for a new perspective where customers actively co-create unique value for themselves through personalized interaction. In a similar vein, Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) suggest that value is always co-created through active and dynamic firm-consumer interaction and integration of resources of the supply and demand sides.

While the phenomena of tourism, travel and leisure have always incorporated experiential aspects to a higher extent than other types of services and goods, the focus on the more experiential aspects of travel among tourism and leisure scholars is relatively new (Scott, Laws & Boksberger, 2009).

The co-creative aspect of a typical tourism experience means that it usually involves frequent social interactions (Li & Petrick, 2008; Maunier & Camelis, 2013). As a result, some scholars highlight the creation of meaningful and unique value for individual tourists through personal interaction and call for a deeper understanding of tourist social interaction (Rihova et al., 2013; Campos et al., 2015). Social actors who participate in tourist social interaction (and thus co-create tourist experiences) can be categorized into three types: service providers (e.g., Salvado, 2011; Minkiewicz, Evans & Bridson, 2014), the local community (e.g., Azevedo, 2009; Richards, 2010), and other tourists (e.g., Rihova et al., 2013, 2015; Reichenberger, 2017). To better understand the tourist experience, it is necessary to know what kind of role these three groups of social actors play in the co-creation of tourist experiences. In the following sections, we will review the extant literature on the role of each of these three groups of social actors in the tourist experience co-creation process.

Social interaction with service providers

A fresh look at the role of service providers in co-creating unique and memorable tourist experiences places tourists at the center of their own experiences. Arnould and Price (1993) argue that the interaction and relationship between the tourist and service personnel directly influence the tourist's emotional reactions to extraordinary experiences. In this perspective, the front-line employee becomes an important operant resource for co-creating customer experiences, and eventually contributes to improving the organization's competitive advantage (Lusch, Vargo & O'Brien, 2007).

Several studies have explored the role various types of tourism service providers play in the tourism experience across different tourism contexts.