

Original Research Article

A New Light on the Construction of Tourism Experience

Amir Mohammad Moazezi Mehr-e Tehran¹, Mehdi Fatemi^{2*}

1. Assistant Professor, Conservation of Architectural Heritage Department, Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran.

2. Assistant Professor, Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran.

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Abstract | Today, tourism needs to offer a memorable experience to gain a competitive advantage in the global market, and hope that tourists will purchase that experience. At the same time, a large portion of tourism providers still rely on tangible assets and limited locations to create such an experience, overlooking the potential of the qualitative and intangible resources of the destination and the actors involved in tourism, as well as the approaches and effective tools to actualize these potentials. This article, based on logical reasoning and through the analysis of the content of documents and relevant research, discusses the resources, approaches, and tools that enable the deepening of the tourist's experience, to present a different form of tourism known as relational tourism. It focuses on three main subjects: qualitative and intangible resources as the key elements of a co-creative value creation approach; co-creation as the primary approach to value creation and competitive advantage; and tourism service providers as facilitators of dynamic communication between tourists and the destination, and enablers of creating a unique experience for tourists.

Keywords | *Cultural tourism, Experience, Qualitative and operant resources, Co-creation, Tourism service providers.*

Introduction | Tourism is recognized as a global industry whose functional scale encompasses all tourist destinations worldwide, and these destinations are in tight competition to attract global tourist demand (Robati Anaraki, 2016, 16). Among the numerous factors influencing the development of this industry¹ and the attraction of tourists, the tourist destination (including tangible and intangible attractions) is one of the most important. Considering that the "experience" of a tourist shapes the core product of tourism, the destination, and its attractions are also at the center of visitors' attention (Richards & Wilson, 2007, 20). Therefore, tourist destinations, emphasizing their unique assets and striving for differentiation from other tourist destinations (Jafari, Ghaffari & Abasi, 2018), seek to

provide a memorable experience for tourists, aiming to increase their chances of revisiting. In the initial efforts to achieve this goal, the cultural capital of the destination is transferred through a one-way process, and tourists are passively encouraged to consume it² (Prentice & Andersen, 2007; Richards, 1996a). In today's highly competitive market, the approach that solely focuses on the supply of goods and services in creating an experience is outdated (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Providing rich, unique, useful, controllable, and tangible experiences (Tan, Kung & Luh, 2013) that involve learning and emotional engagement (Lee, 2015), excitement, and memorability (Ta & Yang, 2019), as well as interaction (Richards, 2020), enables differentiation and, consequently, the creation of greater added value. This is because in this case, tourists can express themselves and

** Corresponding author: +989369379526, Fatemi@arc.ikiu.ac.i

experience the realization of their wishes and desires through participation in authentic experiences that stimulate their imagination and creativity (Hung, Lee & Huang, 2016). This can only be achieved by investing in a form of personal engagement and activating qualitative and operant resources for tourism (Ross, 2018; OECD, 2014) in a process of co-creation of experience. In this process, tourists and tourism service providers collaborate with each other to create an experience and generate value (Mathis, Kim, Uysal, Sirgy & Prebensen, 2016). However, tourism still largely relies on tangible and destination-based aspects (Ross, Saxena, Correia & Deutz, 2017) and is place-dependent (Richards & Wilson, 2007), it assumes a secondary role in the social value and performance of the destination, which is dependent on intangible and qualitative factors such as people (Ross, 2018). The existing potential in a co-creative system for creating experience and value is overlooked, and the importance and role of tourism service providers in facilitating the creation and deepening of the tourist experience are ignored.

By referring to the 20-year vision of Iran in the tourism sector, we can observe the same gap. Although the appropriate share of Iran in the international tourism market has been emphasized, the proposed strategies do not address the co-creation approach in value creation and the role of tourism service providers in this co-creation of experience (Shafia & Talaie, 2021).

This weakness in the holistic attention to the fundamental elements of experience creation and the effective approach and tools for its creation. A practical gap in the tourism discourse prompted this study to emphasize the importance and explanation of the relationship among three topics: 'Qualitative and operant Resources, Co-creation, and Tourism Service Providers' as less seen and sometimes overlooked subjects in achieving and deepening the tourist experience. This article, through content analysis of documents and relevant and accessible studies collected through the document research method, while studying the genealogy of tourism, provides a retrospective interpretation of tourism with a focus on the discourse of cultural tourism. It explains a late reading of tourism in which "communication and interaction" are the key foundations for realizing the experience. In the process of obtaining the result, the "logical reasoning" strategy, which is capable of compiling extensive theoretical literature in the form of a system or conceptual framework, has been used (Groat & Wang, 2017).

Research Background

Numerous studies, both domestic and international,

have attempted to explain this conceptual shift in tourism. However, most of them focus on conceptual explanations, different readings, and more recent dimensions and components of tourism (Richards, 1996, 2011, 2021; Richards & Raymond, 2000; Richards & Wilson, 2006) and evaluate the influential factors in development and provide solutions for its realization in a practical context (Ghasemi, Kamranifar & Hayati, 2015; Zargham Borujeni & Azizi, 2017; Lin, Chen, Trac & Wu, 2021). Some studies, despite mentioning the concept of value co-creation, have emphasized the application of co-creation with tourists as the main actors in a tourist destination (Hassanzadeh, Delafrooz, Gholipour Soleimani & Shahroudi, 2021; Taherikia, Jalali & Tabrizian, 2020; Rahmati & Radfar, 2020; Mendes, Valle & Scott, 2015) and have overlooked the role of tourism service providers in facilitating co-creation of value and experience. In places where the collaboration between tourists and tourism service providers in the development of tourist experience is emphasized (Coleman & Cragg, 2002; Pfanner, 2011; Prebensen, Chen, & Uysal, 2014), the foundation of value creation and co-creation of experience has been based on tangible and quantitative assets. Among them, except for a study conducted by Ross and colleagues (2017) on "Archaeological Tourism: A Creative Approach" that focuses on the significant role of tourism service providers in creating a creative experience for tourists (Ross et al., 2017), there are few studies that specifically address the role of tourism actors, particularly tourism service providers, as facilitators of experience and value creation at the destination by strengthening the dynamic relationship between tourists and the infrastructure and "quantitative and operand resources". There are fewer studies on co-creative approaches in creating value for tourism based on "qualitative and operant resources," and ultimately, there are fewer studies on "relational tourism" as a different reading of tourism that emphasizes the intangible aspects, the co-creation approach, and tourism service providers.

Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical foundations of this study begin within the discursive framework of cultural tourism, exploring its genealogy and reviewing its conceptual developments. By introducing the recent and common approach in this type of tourism, it aims to lay the groundwork for the conceptual model of the study, while providing a comprehensive

understanding of the influential factors, specifically the experiential dimension in tourism.

• **The evolutionary process of cultural tourism and the emergence of experiential tourism**

Cultural tourism encompasses travel to different places to understand the elements and characteristics of local cultural heritage. Richards (1996) provides two definitions for cultural tourism: a technical definition and a conceptual definition. The technical definition relates to the products and elements of cultural tourism that constitute the attractiveness of cultural tourist destinations, such as “specific cultural attractions, heritage sites, cultural and artistic displays, art, and performances”. This definition emphasizes heritage attractions more than the actual experiences of tourists. On the other hand, the conceptual definition focuses on the nature of tourist experiences and the motivations of cultural tourists, which is “the purposeful collection of information and new experiences to satisfy and fulfill their cultural needs” (Richards, 1996b, 23), emphasizing the experiences of tourists beyond local heritage. The distinction highlighted in Richards’ definition brings attention to the significant difference between supply-driven and demand-driven approaches in cultural tourism studies.

• **Supply-driven and demand-driven approaches of cultural tourism**

The supply-driven approach in cultural tourism is product-centered, meaning that the activity of cultural tourism is defined through the products that are offered. These products can include cultural tours, themed parks, museum visits, historical sites, and so on. By providing opportunities to encounter heritage and cultural elements such as landmarks, buildings, historical sites, museums, and art galleries, these products contribute to an interpretation of local history and culture (*ibid.*). Therefore, supply-driven models place cultural heritage at the center of attention, defining the destination through its attractions and prioritizing tourists who travel to admire them. In such cases, cultural capital is transferred unilaterally along the tourism path, and tourists are passively encouraged to consume heritage (Prentice & Andersen, 2007; Richards, 1996a). In these circumstances, the desire to stay and re-experience the place diminishes for variety-seeking tourists who enter the tourism destination with different goals. This is because these tourist destinations impose themselves on tourists and do not allow them to construct their own experiences. As a way to differentiate destinations and gain

competitive advantages, experience-based approaches in cultural tourism have gained importance (Richards & Raymond, 2000). By developing products in tourism, cultural tourists can learn and experience other cultures and gain social capital from this process (McKercher & Du Cros, 2002). This is particularly emphasized in recent research by the “Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research (ATLAS)”, highlighting the qualitative shift in the demand for cultural tourism towards new cultural areas, especially more intangible and people-oriented cultural forms (Bonetti, Simoni & Cercola, 2015).

Based on this, in the demand-driven or experience-driven approach to cultural tourism, the focus is on individuals and the sense-making³ experience they derive from it. The individual interpretation of cultural heritage plays a central role in this approach, and considering that each tourist constructs their own meaning of heritage, it can be argued that the tourist experience in an experience-driven approach is a process of personal self-discovery rather than a passive admiration of heritage, as seen in supply-driven approaches (Richards, 1996a). In such an interpretation, the value is not inherent in the product itself but rather arises from the memorable and satisfying experiences it creates and the consumer’s perception. It is the tourist who, with their skills, experiences, and prior knowledge, referred to as “qualitative and operant assets,” becomes the main actor in the process of value creation and increase of destination attractiveness (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). While the qualitative and operant resources of tourists have an impact on their interactions, perceptions, and valuations of local situations, evidence shows that tourist satisfaction increases when their tourist experience enables them to establish connections on personal and emotional levels with the “tangible and quantifiable assets” of the destination (such as physical spaces and available materials and resources) (Ross et al., 2017).

In other words, the activation of qualitative and intangible assets within the framework of quantitative and tangible assets influences the tourist experience and it will have its greatest impact when it leads to value creation through co-creation processes.

• **Co-creation, an approach to deepen and realize tourism experiences**

Co-creation in tourist experiences is defined as the “sum of psychological events of a tourist during active physical or mental participation in activities and interactions with other subjects in the

experiential environment” (Campos et al., 2015, 23). In this sense, tourists can engage in co-creating a tourist experience by actively participating in the co-production process, involving their psychological and emotional engagement with the heritage and aiming to discover specific aspects of the heritage based on their interests (Moscardo, 1996; Minkiewicz Evans & Bridson, 2014; Calver & Page, 2013). The tourist’s participation in co-creating an experience becomes meaningful when it occurs within the context of the host-guest relationship (Rahman & Narendra, 2017), as in a co-creative system, the interaction among actors is essential for facilitating the simultaneous process of creation (Bonetti et al., 2015). In other words, the primary focus of the co-creation of value in tourism is on “relationships” (Wantanee & Timothy, 2015), and the role of cultural tourism service providers in facilitating this relationship is undeniable (Prebensen, Chen & Uysal, 2014).

According to Buonincontri, Morvillo, Okumus & Niekerk (2017), co-creation involves a minimum of two actors committed to resources who, as a unified entity, create value for each other through mutual collaboration (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Among these actors, one of the important players in the co-creation of value and experience is tourism service providers (Assiouras, Skourtis, Giannopoulos, Buhalis & Koniordos, 2019).

• Co-creation of experience and the role of tourism service providers

Although tourism service providers play a significant role in co-creating the tourist experience and interaction with the destination, their creative and influential role in the tourism sector has received less attention despite a decade of research on tourism experiences. In fact, the tourist experience is jointly created and executed through a wide range of participatory activities between them and the tourists. These activities aim to develop skills and express the presence of tourists, encouraging their interest and interaction with local cultural elements (Richards, 2011).

In this context, the role of tourism service providers transforms from simply providing services that only bring “mindless enjoyment without engaging their thoughts and ideas” to facilitators in the development of a generative role for tourists (Morgan, Watson, & Hemmington, 2008; Prentice & Andersen, 2007). Therefore, it is expected that service providers not only guide tourists but also actively participate in the creation of immersive travel experiences, which is a key principle emphasizing the co-creative process

between tourists and providers as an essential component of cultural tourism (Ross, 2018).

Tourism service providers, in line with what Anderson (2012) refers to as “the coming together of place and practice”, contribute meaningful experiences to tourists through their skills and creativity, giving them a significant role beyond regular tourism aspects. For example, they can provide platforms for learning local cuisine or handicrafts (Richards & Wilson, 2006; Tan et al., 2013), and instead of relying solely on their skills and expertise, they can utilize available cultural and creative resources. They can also organize cultural events such as music festivals (Edwards, 2012), which attract a large number of creative individuals and subsequently foster dynamism and innovative initiatives in the destination, aiming to enhance tourist experiences (Mathisen, 2012).

Discussion and Explanation of the Conceptual Model

Based on the theoretical discussions mentioned above, a framework is presented in Fig. 1 that addresses some of the shortcomings in the current perspective of the tourist experience, emphasizing the less-seen components and sometimes overlooked tools in realizing and deepening the tourist experience. This conceptual framework highlights the value derived from an interactive process rather than a purely product-centric process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Melis, McCabe & Del Chiappa, 2015) and considers the co-creation approach essential in creating and developing the experience, highlighting the active participation of tourists and the interaction between tourists and service providers along this path (Campos et al., 2015). In this framework, the tourist is placed at the center of the stage, considering their qualitative and operant assets, while the service provider is introduced as a facilitator of the tourist experience.

Based on this framework, tourism service providers, by understanding the tourists’ qualitative expectations, skills, and previous experiences, and by considering the operant resources of the tourist alongside the operand resources of the destination, can enhance the creation of the tourist experience (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Melis et al., 2015). Here, the provider relies on their creativity and, based on the exchange of services rather than goods - the approach known as the “service-dominant logic” in management and marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) - creates a platform for co-creating value through the

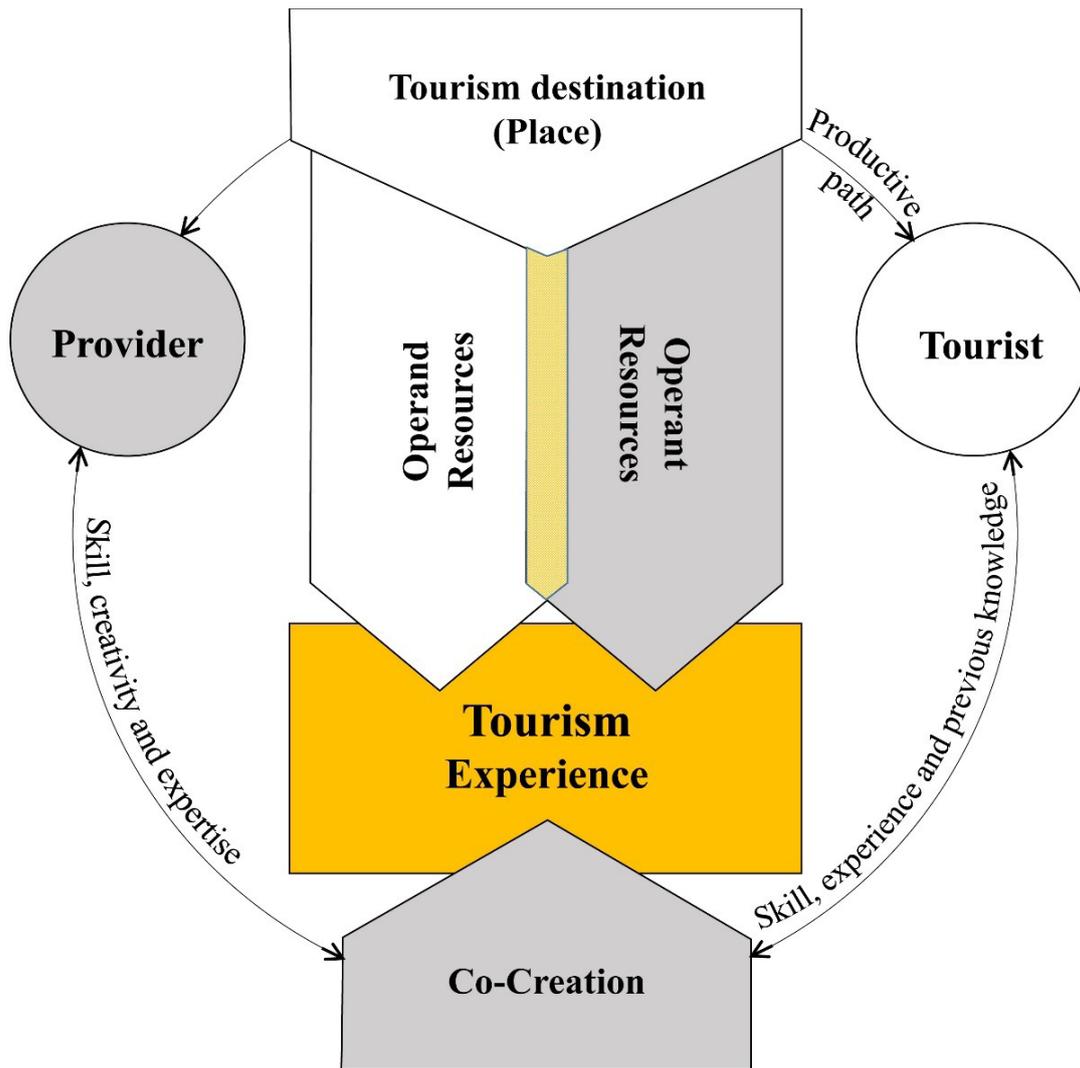


Fig. 1. The conceptual framework of relational tourism with an emphasis on operant resources, co-creation, and tourism service providers as the main issues in the construction of tourism experience. Source: Authors.

interaction among tourists, service providers, and the destination (Carman, 2009). Therefore, within this framework, the emphasis is on the potential of operant aspects of the destination, the tourist, and the tourism service provider, while reducing the centrality of operand and tangible place-based factors.

Conclusion

This study attempted to emphasize the importance of the three issues of qualitative and operant resources as the key elements of the co-creation approach to value creation; Co-creation, is the primary approach for creating value and competitive advantage, with active participation of tourists and the interaction between tourists and tourism service providers; And

the role of tourism service providers, as facilitators of dynamic communication between tourists and destinations, ultimately creating the foundation for the creation of unique and meaningful experiences for tourists. From a co-creation perspective, and in situations where operand and quantitative tourism destination resources are less accessible, tourism service providers will play a key role in realizing the tourism potential of the destination by focusing on qualitative and operant resources.

In the current competitive environment, tourism service providers can gain an advantage when they understand the qualitative expectations, skills, and previous experiences of consumers and enhance the experience at the destination by combining operant resources with operand resources. As a

result, dreams and tourism experiences are not pre-packaged and defined, but rather created through the active participation of tourists and the simultaneous role-playing of tourism service providers. In other words, creating tourism experiences today requires a participatory interaction to develop knowledge and skills during communication ⁴because this value and social performance, which is dependent on individuals or the intangible dimension of tourism, plays a primary role in the tourist experience. Therefore, today we need to consider another type of tourism,

namely “relational tourism”, in which qualitative and operant resources are the foundation, co-creation is the primary approach, and tourism service providers are the main tools for achieving a unique experience in tourism.

Declaration of non-conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest among the authors.

Endnote

1. Three main factors in the development of tourism: tourists (guests), local people (hosts) and destination characteristics (attractions) (Robati Anaraki, 2016, 16).
2. As a result of encouraging consumption that followed the “market logic” - which considers a place as a commodity - phenomena such as the repetitive cycle of creating Guggenheims (symbolic architecture) or the “continuous reproduction of culture” (Richards and Wilson, 2007; Evans, 2003), holding festivals (Quinn, 2006), construction -similar

to what happened in Dubai- (Al Rabadya, 2012), and holding events (Jakob, 2013) emerged.

3. The concept of “sense-making”, according to Hill and Levenhagen (1995), refers to constructing a mental landscape or model of how the environment operates.

4. In a cooking class in a tourist destination, the most memorable part is not the cooking instructions or the food itself, but the people who share their creative skills (Richards, 2021).

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