

Tourist Operant Resources on Online Citizenship Behavior

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Sustainability has emerged as a critical concern in the tourism industry. In sustainable tourism, the question of how to engage tourists in value co-creation has started to receive attention.

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1. Introduction

The tourism industry plays a crucial role in driving the global economy, generating employment, stimulating economic growth, and contributing significantly to alleviating poverty [1]. Sustainability has emerged as a key concern in the tourism industry [2]. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, sustainable tourism is tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social-cultural, and environmental impacts [3]. It addresses the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems [4]. The “2022 Sustainable Travel Consumer Report” by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) and Ctrip.com reveals that sustainable tourism is becoming a global trend, with 69% of travelers actively seeking sustainable tourism options [5]. Many online travel agencies (OTAs), such as Ctrip.com and tuniu.com in China, collaborate with tourism destinations, hotels, and other partners to jointly develop sustainable tourism products, driving the sustainable development of local communities. However, there are still some challenges. OTAs find difficulties in meeting tourists’ personalized needs because of their diverse objectives, such as reducing environmental impacts, seeking more authentic local experiences, preserving cultural heritage sites and traditions, exerting positive effects on communities, or following trends [6]. Some tourists who are willing to prioritize sustainable travel may not be sufficiently familiar with planning sustainable trips, such as finding proper sustainable tourism products. One of the solutions may be engaging tourists in value co-creation, a perspective that emphasizes customer participation in the value creation and collaboration between businesses and customers to generate mutually beneficial value [7][8]. As sustainable tourism is still in the early stages of development, involving tourists in travel service co-production and promotion could foster the overall sustainability and growth of the tourism ecosystem [9].

Existing studies have identified some antecedents of customer value co-creation behavior, including customer motivations [10][11], relationship norms [12], incentive mechanisms [13], adoption of digital technology [14], and so on. Additionally, some scholars have also examined the effects of customer value co-creation, such as increasing customer satisfaction and enjoyment [15][16], improving customer loyalty [17], and consequently building brand equity [18]. Some of these studies were conducted in a tourism context. However, most scholars still believe research on

value co-creation in tourism, especially sustainable tourism, to be in its infancy [19], and there are some issues worthy of further investigation.

Firstly, previous studies focus on how tourists engage in value co-creation through tourist–local community engagement and tourist–destination engagement [11][20]. However, limited research attention has been paid to value co-creation between tourists and OTA platforms. OTAs play a significant role in designing tourism plans and facilitating post-trip sharing [21]. They can provide personalized, sustainable tourism options based on tourists' preferences and provide platforms with tourist feedback that may influence other travelers' decisions, contributing to the growth of sustainable tourism [2]. Despite the significance of tourist–OTA engagement, very few empirical studies have examined this area [22].

Secondly, service-dominant logic underscores the significance of operant resources, such as the knowledge, skills, and experience possessed by customers, which are fundamental sources of strategic benefit for businesses [23][24]. Tourists must spend their operant resources to participate in the pre-travel stage value co-creation, such as through gathering travel information, interacting with OTA service personnel, and providing input and suggestions regarding their travel plans [25]. However, the question about the contributive role of tourist operant resources is unanswered [7]. Furthermore, customer participation behavior (in-role behavior) and customer citizenship behavior (extra-role behavior) are two types of value co-creation behavior [26] that do not always occur simultaneously. According to Assiouras et al., the willingness to engage in customer citizenship behavior is also a positive outcome of customer value co-creation [27]. Therefore, it is essential to systematically understand the transformation from investing tourist operant resources in in-role co-creation to proactive extra-role behavior such as online recommendations, help, and feedback post-trip throughout all stages of tourism [28].

Thirdly, scholars advocate that customer operant resources contribute to improving the co-created value [29]. Do tourist operant resources always create value for tourists through an interaction between tourists and OTAs in sustainable tourism? Reality often does not align with desires. In recent years, studies on value co-destruction have revealed that co-creation may have negative effects [30][31]. Plé and Cáceres argued that value co-destruction arose when resources were misused, specifically when they were not integrated or utilized in a manner expected by the other service system [30]. The level of communication and resource integration can influence whether tourist operant resources are misused, thereby affecting the outcomes of interactive value formation [25][32]. Empirical research is needed to investigate how the quality of communication (knowledge distance between tourists and OTA service personnel) as well as the resource integration capability of service personnel influence the effectiveness of tourist operant resources in the context of value co-creation between tourists and OTAs.

2. Service-Dominant Logic and Value Co-Creation

Service-dominant logic emerged from the longstanding debate over the primacy of "goods" versus "services" [33]. The traditional goods-centered view focuses on operand resources as the units of exchange [23]. Under service-dominant logic, marketing is viewed as a series of social and economic processes that rely mainly on operant resources [34]. Operand resources represent tangible assets, such as economic resources, products, and raw

materials. Operant resources are often invisible and intangible, and are represented by knowledge and capacity [35]. In alignment with the resource advantage theory and core competency theory, service-dominant logic emphasizes that operant resources (skills and knowledge) lie at the heart of value creation and, instead of tangible assets, are the fundamental source of competitive advantage [36].

In the original service-dominant logic, customers are no longer perceived as mere “value receivers” but are also “value co-creators”. As possessors of operant resources, customers can contribute their knowledge, skills, and experience to co-create a desired value during the interaction process with producers [23]. Customers’ operant resources are one of the factors that can enhance customer co-creation behaviors [37]. There are two types of customer value co-creation behaviors: customer participation behavior and customer citizenship behavior [26]. Unlike customer participation behavior, which comprises the necessary in-role behavior for successful value co-creation [38], customer citizenship behavior is voluntary and extra-role, composed of advocacy, help, and feedback, and can create an exceptional value for businesses [39]. In sustainable tourism, tourists’ online citizenship behavior includes recommending sustainable products or services from travel agencies, sharing their own experiences, helping other tourists in selecting sustainable tourism products, and providing feedback and suggestions to tourism service companies via online platforms [31]. The willingness of tourists to engage in online citizenship behaviors is, to some extent, dependent on the value they derive from value co-creation [27].

With continuous refinement and development of the theory, Vargo and Lusch modified their proposition to assert that “value is co-created by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary” [24]. Value co-creation is a dynamic process involving multiple actors who continuously contribute their own operant and operand resources and integrate them through interactions to generate an anticipated value [40]. Collaborative efforts among multiple actors can generate not only economic value but also contribute to the co-creation of social and environmental value [41][42]. OTAs can engage tourists in a process of value co-creation that can be beneficial for both sides. Involving tourists with operant resources in the co-design of trips could provide a more personalized travel experience that aligns with their individual needs. It may trigger tourists to carry out online citizenship behaviors, such as providing recommendations and feedback about services, which may be beneficial for OTAs. However, within the context of sustainable tourism, there is a lack of empirical research on how multiple participants integrate resources to co-create value and consequently enhance tourists’ online citizenship behavior.

3. Tourist Operant Resources and Online Citizenship Behavior

Customers are considered as the most valuable asset for businesses [43]. The engagement of customers as value co-creators can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the value co-creation process [44]. The customer operant resources, including their knowledge and experience, serve as the foundation for their engagement in value co-creation, facilitating communication, interaction, and the collaborative creation of value [23].

In the context of tourism, tourist operant resources encompass knowledge about sustainable tourism products, skills of interacting with OTA service personnel, and experience in customizing tourism itineraries [45]. These

resources enable them to actively participate in and contribute their viewpoints to the value co-creation ecosystem of sustainable tourism. This knowledge and experience can also help develop tourists' capability to perform online citizenship behavior that provides valuable suggestions about product and service improvements to OTAs [46], and helps others design their trips in OTAs' online communities. By utilizing their own knowledge and resources to co-design sustainable travel, tourists can gain a more unique experience, resulting in greater engagement and satisfaction [45]. This may increase tourists' willingness to provide voluntary online recommendations and help others in addressing issues on online tourism forums during service encounters [47].

Moreover, sustainable tourism products have novel and non-standardized features. The target tourists for these products are usually "seekers of new experiences". They are more motivated to invest operant resources and work together with OTA service personnel to create a distinctive and customized travel experience. They also have a stronger willingness to share their knowledge and experience with others.

4. The Mediating Role of Tourist Perceived Value

Customer perceived value refers to customers' subjective, comprehensive, and overall perception towards purchased products or services [48]. In this study, it pertains to tourists' combined assessment of tourism products, OTAs, and service personnel, encompassing both functional value and emotional value. Functional value represents tourists' evaluation of the overall utility of the tourism experience after considering gains and losses, while emotional value encompasses feelings such as happiness, relaxation, and excitement that they experience during or after using these services [49].

According to service-dominant logic, when customers' knowledge, skills, and experience are appropriately integrated, they can actively contribute to the production of products and services, creating value within the service system [50][51]. This process leads to unique experiences and perceptions of value [52][53][54].

On the one hand, tourists possess the knowledge and experience necessary to select suitable tourism products through interactions with OTAs, enabling effective communication with service personnel and clear expression of their expectations and demands. This may facilitate higher satisfaction with the service process and outcomes [55], contributing to an increased functional value [10][56]. These tourists better understand and utilize the functional features of products or services, perceiving them as highly valuable. Tourists with a greater functional value are more likely to voluntarily share information, provide recommendations, and assist other community members in sustainable tourism [57]. Therefore, tourist operant resources can enhance functional value, thereby promoting feedback, recommendations, and assistance in the online tourism community through customer citizenship behavior.

On the other hand, when tourists contribute their knowledge, skills, and experience to the process of designing tourism itineraries, they earn respect and recognition from service personnel, leading to feelings of pleasure and enjoyment, thus enhancing emotional value [58]. Furthermore, when tourists participate in the service process and engage in self-production, they deepen their connection to the output, triggering emotional transfer and enhancing

their sense of satisfaction. Positive emotion strengthens tourists' trust and preference towards OTAs or tourism products, making them more likely to recommend them to others [59]. Muniz and O'Guinn found that participation in activities, such as product design, in brand community empowered customers with a sense of autonomy and pleasure. This could prompt them to engage in communication, interaction, and mutual assistance [60]. Additionally, helping others can also lead to a sense of accomplishment, resulting in increased happiness and satisfaction [61]. These positive experiences drive tourists to consistently engage in online citizenship behavior. Thus, tourist operant resources can also promote citizenship behavior within online tourism communities by enhancing perceived emotional value of tourists.

5. The Moderating Role of Knowledge Distance

In the highly interactive tourism industry, value is generated through interactions between tourists and service personnel [56]. The quality of communication between both parties can influence whether tourists' resource investment leads to the expected value. Due to the varying perspectives on approaches to sustainable tourism development, as well as the differing experiences and preferences regarding sustainable tourism, OTA service personnel and tourists may possess distinct knowledge bases that affect the quality of their communication. This difference in the knowledge possessed by information providers and receivers is referred to as knowledge distance [62].

When the level of knowledge distance between tourists and OTA service personnel is low and they share excessive similarity in knowledge, skills, and experiences, customers may not perceive a new value output [63]. Tourists may feel that they can select suitable tourism products based solely on their own knowledge and experience, without the need to communicate with service personnel. Their investment in terms of knowledge, emotions, and cognition may not yield equitable returns, reducing the perception of functional and emotional value [64][65].

As the knowledge distance increases, their levels of knowledge, skills, and experience show a certain degree of diversity at a reasonable level. This means that both parties share some common knowledge background and have similar viewpoints but are not completely identical [66]. In this way, tourists can understand the proposed value of OTAs and the guidance of service personnel, while service personnel can obtain necessary information regarding the demands and suggestions of tourists. Additionally, both parties can generate new value through the collision of different opinions and viewpoints, thereby enhancing tourists' perception of functional value [58]. Furthermore, tourists are likely to gain more respect and recognition from service personnel by contributing unique suggestions during the co-creation process, leading to an increase in perceived emotional value [59].

However, when the knowledge distance exceeds a certain extent, tourists may find it difficult to understand and evaluate the proposed value of OTAs. Service personnel may also encounter obstacles in understanding tourists' interests and demands [67]. An excessive knowledge distance becomes a communication barrier, and communication difficulties hinder optimal value creation [68]. Consequently, tourists may perceive their invested resources as being misused, potentially leading to value co-destruction [30] and decreasing their perceived value.

Under these circumstances, tourists need to invest additional time and effort into the interaction process, leading to a reduced utilization of their operant resources in value co-creation, making it challenging to create satisfactory value.

6. The Moderating Role of Resource Integration Capability

The resource-based view emphasizes the importance of operant resources, such as knowledge, skills, and experience [69]. However, static and singular resources do not equate to value. Customer operant resources can only become valuable when effectively integrated with other resources and utilized towards reaching a unified value creation objective [70]. Scholars have pointed out that the misuse of customer resources is one of the significant factors leading to value deterioration. For instance, Plé and Cáceres suggested that employees' successful integration of customer resources could lead to value co-creation during the interaction process, while an improper integration of resources might result in value destruction [30]. This study takes the resource integration capability of OTA service personnel as another boundary condition that affects tourist participation in value co-creation.

Resource integration capability refers to the ability of firms to combine the resources owned and acquired, and rebuild and restructure these resource bases in pursuit of value creation [71]. In this study, it refers to the ability of OTA service personnel to effectively integrate the resources provided by customers with resources of OTAs to create value for tourists. The resources of OTAs encompass a wide range of travel products (such as hotels, airlines, attractions, and local activities) and service options (such as travel data and information, payment processing, and customer support). As resource integrators, OTA service personnel need to align these resources based on tourists' expectations and preferences, thus offering services that meet requirements [9].

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