



# Managing the experience co-creation process in tourism destinations: Empirical findings from Naples



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The paper theoretically develops and empirically tests a model on experience co-creation in tourism.
- Antecedents of experience co-creation in tourism are individuated.
- Consequences of experience co-creation in tourism are individuated.
- Experience co-creation makes tourists more satisfied and happier.
- Tourists are more willing to spend for co-created experiences.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 8 June 2016

Received in revised form

27 February 2017

Accepted 29 April 2017

### Keywords:

Tourism experience

Co-creation

Tourists' satisfaction

Tourists' level of expenditure

Tourists' happiness

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the main antecedents and consequences of experience co-creation in tourism. Based on an in-depth literature review, a survey was designed, and data was collected from 385 tourists visiting Naples, Italy. A path analysis revealed that the interactions among tourists and tourism service providers and the active participation of tourists are antecedents of experience co-creation in the tourism industry. Experience co-creation positively affects the satisfaction of tourists, their level of expenditures, and their happiness. Study results also revealed that the attitude of tourists of sharing their experiences with others does not influence experience co-creation. As one of the first studies in this area in the field of tourism, this study contributes to the body of knowledge by proposing and empirically testing a model that shows three antecedents and three consequences of experience co-creation in tourism.

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## 1. Introduction

Co-creation is a demand-centric and interactive process that involves at least two willing resource-integrating actors who are engaged in specific forms of mutually beneficial collaboration that results in value creation for them (Frow, Payne, & Storbacka, 2011, pp. 1–6). The core idea of co-creation refers to actors creating something in collaboration with or influenced by others (Jaakkola, Helkkula, & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2015). This process may achieve success for both the customer and the organization if the focus is

more on the former than the latter. The continuous involvement of, and communication with customers allows organizations to learn from them (Matthing, Sandén, & Edvardsson, 2004; Normann, 2001; Yen, Gwinner, & Su, 2004). Therefore, the focus of value is moved from inside the organizations to collaborative relationships outside the organizations' boundaries (Frow, Nenonen, Payne, & Storbacka, 2015).

The establishment of a purposeful dialog with customers and the integration of their personal resources with those of organizations characterize experience co-creation (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004a). Experience co-creation is the process through which customers and organizations collaborate in order to create experiences (Mathis, Kim, Uysal, Sirgy, & Prebensen, 2016). It is considered to be a new paradigm for marketing and innovation, providing an innovative understanding of how and by whom experiences are created (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). Pralhad and

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Ramaswamy (2004a) were the first to state that the relationships among customers and organizations have changed. According to these researchers, value is not generated through firm-centric, product-and-service-focused managerial strategies. However, it is embodied in the individual experiences of customers, who define experience co-creation as the joint creation of value by the organization and the customers, allowing the customers to co-construct service experiences to suit their context (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004b).

While the traditional firm-centric view focuses on the total control of organizations value chains, experience co-creation focuses on customers as active participants in the building of their own experiences due to personalized and direct interactions with the organization (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). As a result, customers create unique value for themselves by co-creating their experiences with organizations. The focus has evolved from the internal and extraordinary experiences of the individual customer to the concept of experience as a co-created phenomenon (Helkkula, Kelleher, & Pihlström, 2012; Jaakkola et al., 2015). An important role in co-creating experiences is that of technology; specifically, due to new technologies, customers can collaborate with organizations with the objective of realizing experiences that are more valuable for them from both an economic-functional and a cultural and ideological perspective (Cova & Dallı, 2009). In fact, technology can guarantee a greater level of information, transparency, dynamism, and customer-centricity in the co-creation process (Chathoth, Ungson, Harrington, Altınay, & Chan, 2016).

Previous studies have acknowledged experience co-creation as a successful strategy of differentiation against competitors (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013; Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Gössling, Haglund, Kallgren, Revahl, & Hultman, 2009; King, 2017; Morgan, Elbe, Curiel, & de E, 2009; Mossberg, 2008; Schmidt-Rauch & Nussbaumer, 2011). However, previous studies have dedicated little attention to the possible antecedents and consequences related to experience co-creation, especially in the tourism industry. Among these, the study by Lee (2012) reveals that perceived benefits, subjective norms, and ability to co-create are antecedents of the tourists' intention to co-create. Mathis et al. (2016), instead, focus on the consequences of tourism experience co-creation, showing that satisfaction with co-creation of a tourism experience positively affects the satisfaction with vacation experience and the loyalty to the service provider. These studies do not consider both the antecedents and consequences of experience co-creation in tourism, but investigate only one of these two aspects. On the contrary, Grisseemann and Stokburger-Sauer (2012) highlight the company support as an antecedent of the degree of co-creation, and customer satisfaction with the service company, customer loyalty, and service expenditures as consequences. This study, however, does not investigate the antecedents and consequences of experience co-creation in tourism, since the focus is on the co-creation activities of customers of travel agencies. The empirical research on the antecedents and the positive consequences of experience co-creation in tourism is, therefore, still limited. The way in which experience co-creation generates value for both tourists and destinations has not yet been fully investigated. Recognizing these research gaps, Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) called for further research investigating the role of experience co-creation in tourism: "How willing are tourists to participate [...] in order to co-create meaningful tourism experiences? How willing are entrepreneurs and governmental bodies to co-create in the design of meaningful tourism experience environments?" Based on this concept, the aim of this study is two-fold. First, it aims to understand the strengths of influence of the main antecedents of experience co-creation in tourism: the interaction between tourists and tourism service providers in the destination, active

participation of tourists, and sharing of the tourism experience with other stakeholders. Second, it aims to identify the relationship between experience co-creation and tourists' satisfaction, level of expenditure, and happiness.

In line with these research aims, the paper first provides an in-depth literature review, which represents the block of theoretical knowledge that is useful in the development of the conceptual model and for the research hypotheses. Next, the methodological approach and data collection process employed are presented. Subsequently, the paper presents the research results on the antecedents and consequences of experience co-creation in tourism. Finally, the paper discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of the results and offers suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

### 2.1. *Tourism experience and co-creation*

The creation of experiences is a successful process for organizations, because it is considered to be the most evolved form of offer to create value (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), while prior economic offerings were external to the customer, experiences are personal and exist only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level. Therefore, organizations have begun to encourage the collaboration of customers in the co-creation of their own experiences to ensure experiences more related to their customers' needs.

Co-creation refers to an interactive process involving at least two actors who are engaged in specific forms of mutually beneficial collaboration and resulting in value creation for those actors (Frow et al., 2011, pp. 1–6). Co-creation is at the basis of Service Dominant Logic (SDL) that places services instead of products at the center of the economic exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). According to SDL, a customer is no longer considered a target to reach with positioning strategies but must be seen as an active resource who should be involved in the value creation process. With this active role, the customer is able to influence and improve the available resources of the organization. The customer can contribute to realizing innovative products and services that can help create memorable experiences (Chathoth, Altınay, Harrington, Okumus, & Chan, 2013; Grönroos, 2008; Kandampully, Zhang, & Bilgihan, 2015; Lusch, Vargo, & O'Brien, 2007; Matthing et al., 2004; Torres, 2016).

The concepts of value and experience are closely linked (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Yang and Mattila, 2016). This is based on the assumption that customers assign value to experiences and on the consideration that the main outcomes are the experiences co-created by customers and firms in order to obtain value (Ramaswamy, 2011; Suntikul & Jachna, 2016). In particular, value is achieved through co-creative experiences independently of the nature of products and services created (Etgar, 2008). Co-creation begins with the shift from a product and firm-centric view to personalized customer experiences (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, 2004b). Organizations should reconsider their role, and their core activities should become the involvement of customers in a purposeful dialog (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010). The benefit of experience co-creation is related to the ability of customers and organizations to collaborate for the satisfaction and the expectations of both (Chathoth et al., 2014a).

One of the pioneer examples of the experience economy is tourism (Quan & Wang, 2004). The ability of proposing successful experiences is the key factor for tourism service providers at the destination that must face important changes in the industry: the development of new destinations, high competition, the omnipresence of new technologies, and increasing integration between

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