

Rethinking Customer Experience Value in Scenic Area Planning

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Abstract: This study aims to explore how customer experience value (CEV) can be effectively integrated into scenic area planning in the context of tourism. Drawing on experience economy theory, this research demonstrates that scenic areas facilitate value creation not by directly delivering value, but by providing experiential contexts that enable visitors' autonomous engagement. Based on a theoretical understanding of CEV, the present study proposes four planning strategies: (1) establishing themed contexts to enhance situational awareness, (2) strategically placing key nodes to anchor visitor behavior, (3) redesigning pathway arrangements to optimize visitor flow, and (4) leveraging service encounters as facilitators of value co-creation. Collectively, these strategies could contribute to creating CEV while maximizing visitor engagement with the scenic area. The findings of this study advance the theoretical understanding of CEV in tourism settings and offer practical implications for scenic area planning and management.

Keywords: Customer Experience Value; Scenic Area Planning; Experience Economy; Tourism Management

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the explicit phrase “experience economy”, as conceptualized by Alvin Toffler in the 1970s, has established experience as a distinct value proposition beyond traditional products, commodities, and services. In response to intensifying market dynamics, organizations have increasingly sought competitive advantages through external value creation mechanisms, with customer value emerging as a critical strategic differentiator. Drawing upon Gilmore’s hierarchical framework of economic offerings, this evolution reflects a fundamental shift in value creation paradigms [1]. The transition from product-centric functional value to service-oriented value, accelerated by tertiary sector growth, has heightened recognition of customers as active value co-creators, positioning CEV as a central focus in both theoretical discourse and practical applications. Tourist scenic areas are core drivers of value in the tourism industry, playing a vital role in creating experience value for visitors. In a scenic area, the CEV realization process emphasizes experience qualities and the sense of place, requiring careful planning and design to position visitors not merely as service recipients but as active participants and co-creators of CEV in the scenic area. Scenic areas provide intangible products through the touring process, where actual value delivery occurs at the interface of visitor interaction, continuously forming throughout the tour experience and heavily dependent on visitors’ subjective perceptions and judgments. The tourism planning of scenic areas employs user-centered spatial approaches to guide and regulate visitor behavior, thereby designing the touring process to enhance customer perceived value (CPV). The fundamental purpose of planning in scenic areas lies in guiding visitor behavior and attending to visitor perceptions, with the creation of CEV emerging as the strategic objective of planning.

2. CEV THEORY IN SCENIC AREA PLANNING

The conceptualization of CEV transcends traditional customer value paradigms in both scope and significance. Hirschman and Holbrook's seminal work posits that consumption experiences generate experiential value through hedonic and aesthetic dimensions, distinctly contrasting with utilitarian, function-oriented consumption patterns [2]. CPV theoretical frameworks with a predominantly utilitarian vision outline customer subjectivity and individuality, which have informed CEV research [3,4]. Experience, as an independent source of value parallel to goods and services, originates from the service economy while establishing its distinct identity beyond service-based paradigms. In the experience economy, economic offerings transcend conventional services, manifesting as consumer experiences catalyzed through activities embedded in both services and tangible goods [5]. CEV is primarily transmitted through events and behavioral mechanisms [6]. In contrast to passive service delivery, experiences evoke proactive, internal responses. Whereas services merely satisfy needs, experiences enable self-actualization through active participation, embodying the pursuit of an idealized lifestyle. In his typology of experiential value, Holbrook delineates the intrinsic/extrinsic value dichotomy and active/passive value dimensions [7]. Regarding the measurement dimensions of experience value, extant literature distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic value sources. Specifically, "service excellence" is conceptualized as a reactive source of extrinsic value, whereas "playfulness" represents an active source of intrinsic value [8]. Playfulness emerges when consumers shift their role as spectators to become active participants, transforming from distant aesthetic observers to co-creators of value. Empirical studies into experiential value have examined underlying dimensions such as flow states, arousal mechanisms, control perception, and affective responses [9,10]. Mathwick et al. emphasized the contextual and holistic nature of experiential value [11]. CEV emerges through the interactive process between customers and consumption contexts. Organizations cannot directly produce and deliver experiences; rather, they provide the requisite conditions or platforms, along with associated products or services, through which consumers autonomously generate and consume experiences. Several scholars underscore the participatory characteristics of experiential value. When customers transition from passive recipients to active creators, the fundamental composition of experiential value undergoes a substantive transformation. While varying degrees of participation differentially affect goal attainment, the theory of "personal involvement" remains applicable in studying structural dimensions of CEV even within virtual environments [12]. Following Sheth et al.'s customer value taxonomy, experiential value in scenic areas encompasses functional, social, emotional, cognitive, and conditional dimensions [13]. In tourism research, De Ruyter et al. found that museum visitors' overall value perceptions vary across different stages and sequences of the visit [14]. Tourist experience value is influenced not only by the intensity of feelings at each key point but also by the coherence of these points. He posited that the greater the path variability, the more fluctuation there is in value perception. This holds significant research implications for scenic area planning.

Building on the preceding literature and understanding, this paper posits that CEV encompasses at least six essential characteristics: subjectivity, active engagement, participation, process orientation, playfulness, and situational context. Tourism scenic areas cannot directly produce experiences to be provided to customers (visitors). Instead, they serve as experience facilitators by establishing experiential settings that enable autonomous visitor engagement and value co-creation. In scenic area, spatial planning, the management body creates an "experiential context" that facilitates interaction between enterprises, products, and visitors. This approach allows for intentional pathway designs that guide visitors to engage with the context and spontaneously generate experiential events and behaviors. Once the scenic area provides a satisfactory setting and pathways, visitors and the operators of the scenic area collaborate to co-create CEV.

3. STRATEGIES FOR SCENIC AREA PLANNING CENTERED ON CEV CREATION

3.1 Creating Themed Experiential Contexts

The context is an environmental condition in which events occur and influence behavior. The formation of context is a unique process through which external stimuli are internalized through individual consciousness, becoming a key factor in shaping behavior. Kurt Lewin mathematically expressed it as where $B = f(p, e)$, where B denotes behavior, and p and e represent person and environment, respectively. In this function, behavior results from the interaction between the individual and the environment. The consumption context significantly influences purchasing behavior patterns and decision-making processes [15]. For scenic areas, the experiential context enables individuals to derive personally relevant meanings from the environment, which then influence behavior. By constructing tangible environmental spaces, scenic areas facilitate customer perception, enabling them to assign meanings to context and develop a sense of the place, thus creating conditions for subsequent behaviors and events. Consequently, the context should possess a unique personality, achievable through the thematic planning of the scenic environment. Specifically, the spatial layout of the scenic area should be organized by themes, with each section's attractions closely aligned with the theme. Thematic coherence in design and presentation fosters meaningful recognition by visitors, achieving quick and clear cognitive effects. For instance, the main entrance could feature a themed visitor center and a small thematic museum, while the primary buildings within the area could include symbolic thematic designs. Elements like the signage system, public resting areas, viewing facilities, trash bins, and other public amenities could incorporate thematic design elements, highlighting the unique cultural characteristics of the scenic area. Branding, tickets, promotional materials, and employee badges should all bear thematic identifiers, strengthening the contextual connection between visitors and the scenic area.

3.2 Establishing Key Nodes Along the Touring Route

Key nodes in a scenic area consist of the various points of interest, as well as locations in the thematic context that can effectively capture visitor attention. These strategically positioned nodes create accessible spaces where visitors engage in activities, functioning as pivotal sites for behavioral interactions and experience value generation. They play a guiding or transformative role in the routing and flow of visitor movement. In the planning of a scenic area, key nodes typically include key scenic spots as well as public areas such as the main entrance area and visitor center. In addition, activity-oriented nodes should be incorporated into the planning, where behavior-driven activities facilitate the generation of new nodes. The strategic placement of key nodes within the scenic area can be optimized by aligning them with the transportation network and flow planning. Key nodes can leverage the transportation network in the scenic area. Different modes of transportation, such as waterways, roads, bicycle paths, and pedestrian trails, not only link key locations but also enhance the visitor experience by providing a variety of route options at each node location. This integration between nodes and links ensures that key nodes function effectively within the broader pathway network, providing visitors both efficient movement and a more engaging journey through the scenic area.

3.3 Redesigning the Pathway Arrangement

The coordination between key nodes and their connections has a direct impact on the value of the visitor experience. The redesign of the touring path in the scenic area is based on behavioral patterns, aiming to enhance the experiential outcomes through rational route planning. Building upon key nodes and integrating the inherent logic of thematic contexts, the touring path design should guide the continuous flow of visitor behaviors, creating a loop system. The redefined pathways should incorporate distinctive transportation options, such as ecological walking trails, to provide visitors with opportunities for leisurely strolling, resting, and engaging in interactions. The touring path arrangement should form several distinct circular routes, allowing visitors to choose routes based on their preferences and time constraints. In addition to the physical reconfiguration of pathways, activity-oriented touring routes

should be introduced. These routes, driven by specific programs, can generate points of interest that enhance the intrinsic value of the visitor experience. For instance, visitors can receive a commemorative badge after completing a segment of the tour. Upon completing the entire route, they could exchange the badge for souvenirs or other forms of rewards as part of a feedback mechanism for visitors. These engaging activities not only provide the potential to create a key node but also help transform it into a sense of competence for the visitors, enhancing their overall experience.

3.4 Emphasizing Service Encounters

Customer experience is fundamentally tied to products and services, with personalized satisfaction achieved through participation. In the process of creating experience value at a scenic area, service serves as the primary carrier of experience. The foundational level of experience value generation encompasses bilateral interactions between customers and service providers, namely service encounters. Service providers include both the management body at the scenic area and front-line staff who directly interact with visitors. While service encounters controlled by the managerial entity can enhance efficiency, visitors are confined to choosing from limited standardized services. Moreover, when organizations impose fixed service patterns and scenarios on employees, these encounters often prove unsatisfactory [16], as they restrict the occurrence of diverse visitor experience behaviors. Empowering front-line employees with autonomy in employee-dominated service encounters can reduce the pressure they face in meeting visitor needs. Visitor-dominated service encounters are primarily realized through automated services and customization. Integrating these three approaches—organization-led, employee-autonomous, and visitor-dominated—the management body of the scenic area can enable visitors to take virtual tours at the visitor center or museums before formal face-to-face encounters with service personnel (tour guides). They can also present three-dimensional animated representations of the guides whom visitors will formally encounter, helping visitors understand their roles in the upcoming service interactions. During formal service encounters, employees should primarily focus on facilitating visitor behavior while providing information, transforming traditional tour guide commentary into information support. The management body should monitor visitor flow in each service encounter, as well as implement alternative digital tour guide systems to enhance visitor-dominated service encounter forms. Since employees' work performance is an influential factor in service encounters, the management body needs to provide continuous employee management and training to ensure effective service encounters.

4. CONCLUSION

This study adopts a customer value experience perspective, integrating customer value creation theory into the planning of scenic areas. Through the lens of CEV creation, this research proposes generalizable strategies for scenic area planning. Rather than directly producing CEV, scenic area facilitates value creation by providing experiential contexts that enable customers to generate experiential events and behaviors through situational engagement. The establishment of themed experiential context facilitates the development of visitors' situational cognition. The strategic placement of key nodes within scenic areas is crucial, as these nodes function as catalysts for visitor behaviors and experiential events. Through the strategic sequential arrangement of key nodes, multiple interconnected circular pathways are established within the scenic area, avoiding linear and monotonous route patterns. Furthermore, the efficacy of service encounters plays a vital role in CEV creation in scenic areas. Planning and designing tourist scenic areas based on CEV principles offers valuable implications for enhancing tourism product quality and market competitiveness. Future research could employ quantitative methodologies to examine the relationship between variations in scenic area experience value and planning effectiveness.

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