Article

Understanding Destination Value Co-Creation on Social Media: An Application of Travel Blog Analysis

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Abstract: The sharing of travel experiences through social media platforms reflects contemporary consumer culture, but it is still a phenomenon being researched in tourism literature. In this paper, we theorize that sharing travel experience through social media may operate as a distinct social communication process, and investigate how it contributes to the co-creation of destination value. A qualitative analysis of 97 travel blogs reveals three distinct themes that have the potential for co-creating destination value: motivation, memorable travel experiences, and advice. The results indicate that tourists and destination marketers interpret destination value differently in motivation. The sharing of memorable travel experiences and advice with readers and fellow tourists improves potential tourists' cognition and emotional connection to the destination, thereby increasing the level of tourist destination engagement. The extension of the consumer socialization framework provides a deeper understanding of the destination value co-creation process, and provides useful insights for destination promotion and management.

Keywords: consumer socialization theory; destination management; travel blogs; tourism experience; value co-creation

1. Introduction

Social media channels are critical for destination branding [1]. The increasing ease of use of social media for electronic devices, such as iPads and mobile phones, has led to an increase in the use of online travel communities to share travel experiences with others. A huge volume of consumer reviews derived from social media has become an important new dimension in tourism marketing. Individual travel experiences are now widely accessible online, and have the potential to influence tourist decision-making [2].

A recent trend in the travel industry is for destination marketing organizations to encourage tourists to share their travel experiences online through travel blogs [3]. Travel stories written by tourists offer insights about the destination by documenting experiences, assessments, and emotional connections. Travel blogs can thus influence prospective consumers' expectations and guide tourists' co-creative activities [4,5].

Co-creation is recognized as an important tool for product development and marketing [6]; as well as a means to better understand user engagement and associated content generation in social media peer-to-peer environments [7]. In contrast to the conventional firm-centric or product-and-service-focused marketing strategy [8], consumer-to-consumer (C2C) conservations are considered to be a new paradigm for marketing innovations to understand how brand value is co-created [3,9]. Peeroo et al. [10] argued that though a brand may initially embody a manufactured commercialized story, positive brand value is nowadays largely co-created by online communities in C2C conservations. Similarly, brand value can be destroyed by negative comments. In this respect, individual consumer

interactions through peer communication provide a foundation for value co-creation, and without it, brand value co-creation cannot be realized. In the web 2.0 era, mobile applications and the exponential growth of social media have made it possible for consumers to express their preferences on products and services they buy, at anytime and anywhere. Mobile applications allow travelers to share their experiences and emotions about their destination without being limited to staying at home on their computers. Rather, tourists can write travel blogs to share their experiences with others at any stage of their journal. Social media's ability to drive massive consumer commentary and, subsequently, co-create brand value has shifted to consumers, who are creating and sharing content in proactive, innovative ways without being invited to by marketers [11]. Furthermore, travelers sharing their travel experiences and comments on travel related purchases are generally considered non-commercial [12], and are thus regarded as a reliable source of travel information, and can have a significant impact on other potential travelers' decisions and destination management [13–15]. Therefore, marketers must fundamentally rethink their marketing practices, as brands are increasingly a result of social network interactions and conversations rather than through traditional marketing strategies [16,17].

Although the importance of the value co-creation concept has been recognized widely by marketing scholars, it is relatively under-investigated in the tourism literature, and there is little research on how online tourism platforms contribute to destination value co-creation. The rising use of narratives about tourist experiences as a methodology demonstrates the research usefulness of studying travel blogs [18,19]. A few scholars have investigated the process of experience value co-creation on destination platforms [20,21], but these empirical studies focus on how user-generated content platforms influence consumers' engagement with a destination in the pretravel stage [20]. The effects of user stories shared via social media on destination value co-creation in the post-travel stage are little understood [22]. Moreover, travel blogs are increasingly being used by travelers to share their experiences, which provides opportunities for researchers to collect unbiased and unprompted responses about destination stories and travel experiences [18].

The present study aims to analyze narratives published by bloggers in order to explore the destination value co-creation process on social media. This study uses the popular domestic tourist destination, Gulangyu, a World Heritage site in southeast China, as a case study. Gulangyu is recommended by many Chinese travel bloggers, and provides a rich source of netnographic data. This article aims to: (1) gain insights into the themes of travel narratives mentioned in online travel blog postings; (2) assess how these travel experiences, and a particular destination, are evaluated by tourists; and (3) gain an understanding of how destinations can relate to value co-creation through travel narratives and how these narratives may affect prospective tourists.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Value Co-Creation

The concept of value co-creation appears in both tangible products production and intangible commercial activity, and is defined as an interactive process in which two or more entities actively integrate resources (skills, information, etc.) to achieve a shared goal [23]. Both the customer and the company may benefit from this approach [8]. 'Goods-dominant (G-D) logic', which focuses on producing tangible outputs, emphasizes value co-creation as the exchange of output units by multiple parties [24]. Value co-creation focuses on intangible products, and is a process rather than the output of products. It is a form of production where value is produced jointly by consumers and companies through consumer–company interactions, and so can be regarded as 'service-dominant (S-D) logic' [25]. Both theories claim that value is only produced when service providers and customers engage and cooperate [26].

Given the rapid development and extensive use of the Internet, the notion of value co-creation now includes customers as agents playing a leading role in the marketing process who 'actively' co-create and re-create value [6,27]. This creates a new paradigm of customer-

dominant (C-D) logic, which proposes that customers are the primary subjects of value co-creation, and acknowledges that value is produced via experiences and practices that are located in and affected by customers' own social settings [28]. The C-D logic redefines value-creating agency beyond specific service interactions occurring within the service provider's scope of influence, rendering customers' value-formatting process 'invisible' to service organizations [29]. Tourism is experiential in nature, as opposed to other physical products and services [20]. Since experiences are produced and consumed simultaneously in tourism, the customer's role in tourism value co-creation is particularly significant [30]. Thus, C-D logic and value co-creation provide the necessary research lens for this study, which applies C-D logic in a broad sense and places tourists at the center of the inquiry.

2.2. Destination Value Co-Creation on Social Media

Information communication technologies (ICT) now facilitate and empower users to co-create experiences through social media [31,32]. Social media facilitates actor engagement and interaction through which consumers participate in the knowledge exchange process [33,34], and achieve value co-creation [35]. Destination value derives from experiential value, which is different from social, functional, and market values, and refers to the performance assessments of travel products or services involving a series of salient attributes [20], including individual preference, diversity of activities, and tourist emotions and sensations. Tourism consumption occurs within social contexts [36]. Through online connections with community members, social media are primarily communication systems that enable travelers to interact with other travelers, resulting in the co-creation of unique experiences and destination value [37,38]. Travel products and tourist destinations may be evaluated differently by travelers and service providers within the cognitive perspective [39], especially when certain tourism activities or destination elements are rarely promoted by tourism destination managers (DMO), but are frequently mentioned in tourists' reviews and are popular among the community. In this regard, tourists' reviews of a destination's attributes, descriptions of distinctive features, and assessments of a destination can contribute to destination value creation through influencing the perceived value of the destination by other potential tourists.

In addition, online travel communities can accommodate the specific desires and needs of travelers [40]. Tourists may encounter different problems during their trips. Whenever travelers have doubts or difficulties about their trips, they turn to community members for advice and assistance. In online travel communities, members often share targeted advice and offer specific, precise solutions to questions based on their real travel experience. The interactive conversations among community members will also be left on social media, helping other tourists with similar problems, which may decrease tourists' hesitation in making a travel decision, thereby enhancing the value of a destination.

Previous studies have emphasized that tourists, in their role as online travel community members, are positive value co-creators [41–43]. Active participation of tourists as a crucial component for a co-creative tourism experience was demonstrated by Buonincontri et al. [8]. Casais et al. [44] used in-depth interviews of guests using accommodation services to show guests' reviews are important in the co-creation of the tourism experience. In their study, relationships were revealed as a key component of the co-creation process. The close relationship between the hosts and guests can lead to value co-creation, and the results indicated that the business model and technology can help to overcome trust difficulties between hosts and guests. Fan et al. [37] adopted a mixed-method approach to investigate online tourist social contacts, and revealed that tourists' satisfaction with their travel experience can be attributed to three distinct factors: intrinsic/extrinsic enjoyment, logistics, and efficiency. By incorporating the guests' reviews, hosts can enhance the service they provide. Though online travel communities have been an important platform for present-day tourists to share their travel experiences, there are still gaps in research on how online platforms contribute to destination value co-creation.

2.3. Consumer Socialization through Social Media

Consumer socialization, rooted in social learning theory [45], attempts to explain how people are influenced to perform their roles as consumers in society with consumption learnt via social contact with both external and environmental factors [46]. Through socialization, consumers can acquire information, skills, and attitudes related to consumption in the marketplace [47]. Individuals and groups that affect learners' self-concepts, emotions, attitudes, and behavior are known as social agents.

A cognitive development model and social learning theory are both employed in consumer socialization theory to explain consumer-to-consumer knowledge transfer [48]. In the former, socialization is understood as a function of qualitative stages in cognitive development, which are based on cognitive/psychological processes. The latter emphasizes external, environmental sources of learning or socialization agents (peers). During the socialization process, consumer interactions are based on a gift-acceptance model of communication rather than the sender-receiver paradigm [49]. That is, the socialization agents offer consumption knowledge as a 'gift to the learner and the learner accepts the gift' [45,50]. Previous research has investigated the socialization process in family settings, with both parents and children as socialization agents [47]. Here, we extend the concept in a social media environment.

Consumer communication over social media in the virtual world is mainly motivated by consumers' need for information, knowledge, and socialization; thus, it is frequently connected with learning about consumption, such as brand preferences and involvement [51]. On tourism social media sites, tourists are likely to both search and share information with others. This indicates that tourists are willing to serve as socialization agents, both to impact others and to be influenced by their peers through peer communication and learning. Customer socialization behavior can apply to cases where a tourist shares his/her travel experience with friends and relatives both online and offline. This study used socialization theory as a conceptual framework to explore consumer sharing and social learning processes over social media and the resulting outcomes. The framework consists of four main elements: antecedents, socialization agents, socialization processes, and outcomes (See Figure 1). In this framework, consumer socialization arises from tourists writing travel blogs to share their experiences about a specific destination with other potential tourists and interact with them. Tourists who share tourism-related information with peers are seen as the socialization agent, whereas destination value co-creation is seen as an outcome of consumer socialization. In this study, we do not aim to make a complete list of peer communication attributes, but rather examine those most germane to the context of our research.
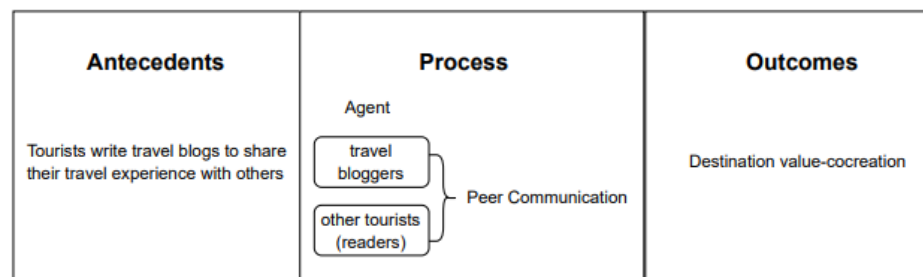

Antecedents	Process	Outcomes
Tourists write travel blogs to share their travel experience with others	Agent: travel bloggers / other tourists (readers) — Peer Communication	Destination value-cocreation

Figure 1. Consumer socialization through social media.

3. Materials and Methods

A qualitative methodological approach was used to investigate social media as spaces for consumer socialization, focusing on tourist-generated travel narratives, discussions, and destination value co-creation. In this study, travel blogs and comments on travel blogs by community members were chosen as the appropriate data to analyze. Tourism experiences, interaction among consumers, and destination values are unavailable to the researcher by their nature, and the only data available comes from the researchers' interpretations of

tourists' reflective narratives [52]. Compared with traditional researcher-led interviews, travel blogs provide a relatively unfiltered and more authentic view of an informant's travel experience [53]. Thus, travel blogs could provide rich 'free expressions' rather than research-elicited responses, full of personal thoughts, emotions, and feelings, and have been widely used by researchers to trace tourism experiences [18,54,55].

The research aim of this study was not to test preconceived hypothesizes, but rather to provide insights into the emerging phenomenon of destination value co-creation on social media. We consider whether each recurring theme of travel experience could be characterized by a distinct type of destination value that may form during tourists' sharing of their travel experience with others on social media. In doing so, we followed the three steps of netnographic analysis suggested by Kozinets [56]: data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation. The online platform, Mafengwo.com, was chosen for data collection for this research since it is one of the leading independent travel service platforms in China. Mafengwo.com is a highly interactive online community where more than 100 million active registered users create travel blogs, share travel experiences, and exchange travel notes with others. Moreover, it is well known among tourists due to its massive user-generated content, and provides inbound and outbound travelers with a variety of travel advice, as well as destination services. According to the official statistics of Mafengwo (http://www.mafengwo.cn, accessed date 16 June 2022), the online travel community provides information about over 60,000 tourist destinations worldwide, including hotels, attractions, restaurants, shopping, and local experiences. The total number of travel guides and destination tips shared by community members exceeded 760 million downloads.

Gulangyu was selected as the case study to gain insight into how travel experiences shared by travelers through travel blogs may affect prospective tourists and the management of a destination. The reasons are threefold. First, Gulangyu was officially listed as a World Heritage Site in 2017. Aside from historical buildings, it also has a wide range of attractions, such as world-class museums, beautiful sand beaches, an aquarium, and many seafood restaurants on the island, that can appeal to many different types of visitors. Second, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, Gulangyu was the second most visited UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2018, attracting approximately 12 million domestic and foreign visitors. Third, Gulangyu is recommended by many Chinese travel bloggers, and provides a rich source of netnographic data.

The data collection was completed in two phases from May to August 2021. All travel blogs and comments about Gulangyu were collected by the first author, who is a native speaker of Mandarin, and who registered on Mafengwo.com in August 2014. In the first phase, following logging in to the website, the first author chose 'Gulangyu' in the destination catalog. The Gulangyu travel blogs obtained were placed in order from the most recent to oldest. The blogs and interactive conservations among community members were then read. To identify the most representative blogs, we only included travel blogs with the most follow-up comments and reviews, since they indicate sufficient and varied social interactions [18]. Next, the first author scanned these blogs to make sure they met the following two criteria: the number of words in travel blogs should be no less than 500 Chinese words, and the content of the travel experience should include more than two travel elements, such as attractions and transportation. In this study, these two criteria were employed to ensure the sample travel blogs shared a wealth of travel narratives, which are a detailed description of the travel experience, rather than a simple review of a specific tourist attraction, hotel, or restaurant in Gulangyu Island, since the focus of this study is to explore the tourists sharing travel stories on the destination as a whole. After screening, 97 travel blogs and their related comments were retained and coded as B-01 to B-97.

NVivo 10 was used for the data analysis. In order to become familiar with the content, the authors first selected ten travel bloggers' posts and their relevant comments to use as a starting point for building initial codes. Ten travel blogs were selected, which represented a variety of heritage tourism (for example, two bloggers who took children to Gulangyu, and three bloggers who were visiting Gulangyu for the first time) and different writing styles,

lengths, and content. After developing the initial codes, the first author repeated the same process to check whether more codes emerged.

A few examples of phrases selected for the data analysis with codes, categories, and themes used are presented in Table 1. A second data analysis phase explored whether collected travel blogs and comments could uncover any new information about Chinese tourist experiences in Gulangyu. In this phase, the same data analysis procedure was used as in the previous phrase. During this second phase, similar categories were repeated, and no new categories emerged. In order to cite from the Chinese language travel blogs, the first author translated the text into English, and then a second translator who is fluent in both languages made further revisions. Finally, the English version was reached.

Table 1. Examples of research codes.

Data Extracts	Codes	Categories	Themes Arose from Categories
My classmates and I went Gulangyu this time mainly to <u>take graduation photos</u>. Both motor vehicles and bicycles are forbidden on the island, which gives a <u>sense of tranquility</u> … … <u>Sunlight Rock</u> is <u>my favorite spot on this trip</u>. (B-01)	1. Taking photos 2. Sunlight Rock 3. Feeling of tranquility	1. Activities (Taking photos) 2. Tourism attraction (Sunlight Rock) 3. Emotion (Feeling of tranquility)	1. Motivation 2. Activity preference 3. Destination emotional experience
Our family visited Gulangyu Island this time mostly to <u>explore local cuisine</u>, however, my daughter <u>really enjoyed the</u> <u>beach</u> and the aquarium on the island. During the holidays, there are a lot of tourists. Visitors who intend to visit Gulangyu must remember to <u>buy tickets in advance</u>. (B-06)	1. Exploring local cuisine 2. Beach 3. Aquarium 4. Buying tickets in advance	1. Activities (exploring local cuisine) 2. Tourism attraction (Beach) 3. Tourism attraction (Aquarium) 4. Knowledge of travel (Buying tickets in advance)	1. Motivation 2. Activity preference 3. Activity preference 4. Travel advice
Comments for B-82: We are planning to take children to stay in Gulangyu for two days, will it be more appropriate to buy package tickets? B-82: It is still recommended to buy <u>tickets separately</u> because the <u>scenic spots in the package are far from away each other</u>, and if children have limited energy, you may not be able to visit all the attractions.	1. Tickets of tourism attraction	1. Knowledge of travel (Buying tickets separately or in a package)	1. Travel advice

Note: underline indicates how the code is extracted from the travel blog text.

4. Results

4.1. Motivation to the Destination and Value Co-Creation

Most bloggers begin their stories by describing what motivates them to travel, because choosing a destination is the first step to preparing for a trip. In the 97 travel blogs selected, 24 bloggers explicitly mentioned their travel motivation for visiting Gulangyu, including the desire to enjoy local food, relax, take photos, enjoy the weather, and find a sense of Taiwan, which cannot be visited by Chinese nationals due to Chinese government travel restrictions to the island since July 2019.

Few bloggers indicated that they visited Gulangyu primarily for cultural reasons. However, Gulangyu is famous for its varied architecture and multicultural history, and was inscribed as a cultural World Heritage Site in 2017. On its official website (http://www.glysyw.com/ accessed on 13 September 2021), the local government provides a great deal of detailed information about Gulangyu Island's world cultural heritage, as well as its history, buildings, celebrities, and film and music related to the island (see Figure 2).
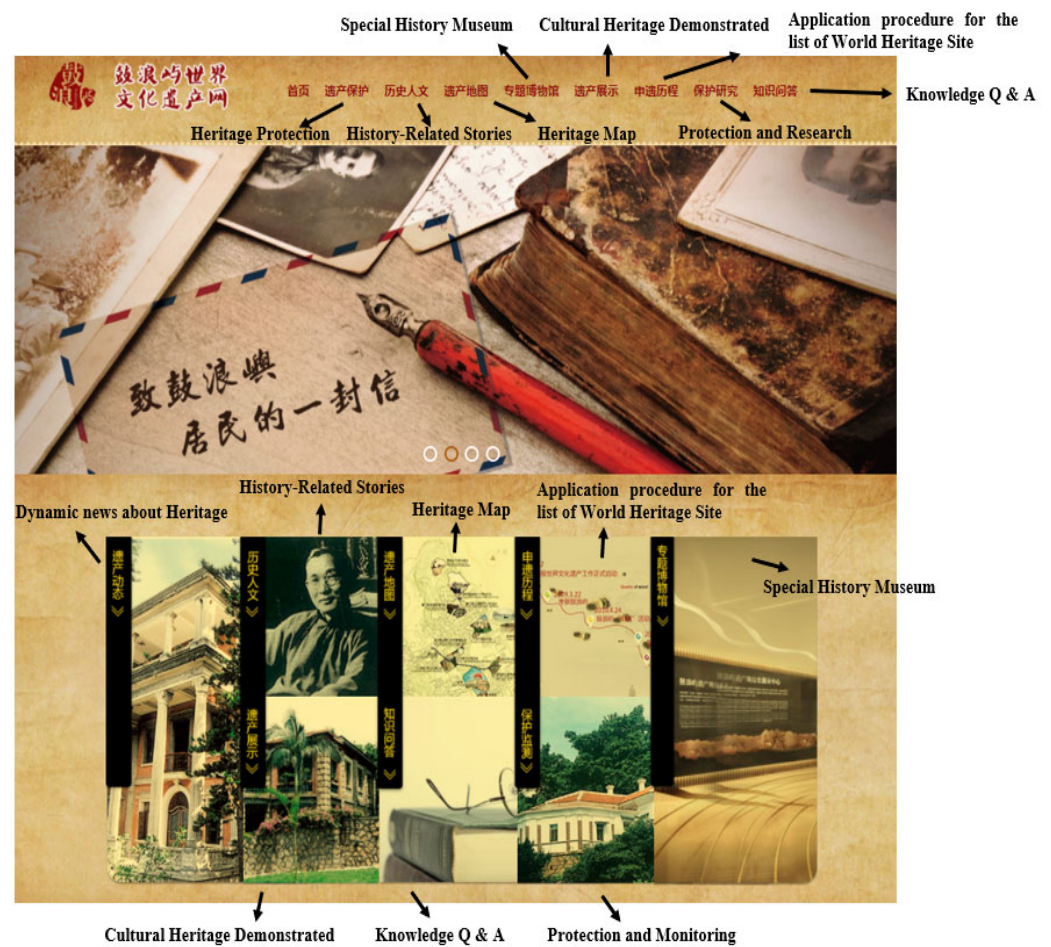
Figure 2. The official website for Gulangyu Island.

This finding differs from previous cultural tourism research which indicates that people come to heritage sites mainly for cultural tourism, such as sightseeing and visiting architectural heritage, and are attracted by the World Heritage status [57,58]. A possible reason is that when tourists (travel bloggers) revisit their travel experiences, they may adopt a different perspective from the destination organizations to interpret the destination value, and place more emphasis on utility and functional value based on their own perspective as tourists. For example, many motivations for visiting Gulangyu mentioned in travel blogs are enjoying the local food and taking photos rather than learning about its history and visiting historical buildings.

> *I chose Gulangyu as my destination mainly because of the variety of southern Fujian snacks available on the island. To prepare a food list that is worth tasting in Gulangyu, I even read many travel blogs and other tourists' recommendations for restaurants in historical buildings before my trip. (B-74, a young couple)*

> *Gulangyu is famous for its Victorian architecture, so a lot of tourists say that visiting Gulangyu is like re-visiting the past. After seeing other travelers' posted photos online, this time, we hired a local photographer in advance. We traveled to Gulangyu and prepared to take a set of vintage photos for keeping our memories of youth. (B-25, a university student who will graduate)*

In this regard, travel bloggers' descriptions of the reasons for traveling may co-create destination value, because bloggers' motivation emphasizes the appeal of specific characteristics of the destination from a tourists' perspective, which may often be overlooked by destination marketers. Although the primary value of Gulangyu lies in its history, culture, and architecture, the tourists' gaze is focused on local food in the alleyways, restaurants

in the old buildings, and the aesthetics of historical architecture, which are all part of its cultural significance. Moreover, some salient pull factors of a destination may be enhanced and turned into new attractiveness after being repeatedly mentioned in bloggers' descriptions of motivation. In the examples above, travel bloggers stated that the reviews, recommendations, and photos of other tourists had directly or indirectly affected their cognition and perceived value of Gulangyu Island. As they explained their travel motivation and mentioned peer influence in their blogs, their motivation may further reinforce certain attributes of a destination (e.g., variety of local food on Gulangyu) to other tourists (readers). Accordingly, these seemingly invisible interactions between tourists, which are not in the form of visible C2C dialogues, constitute an essential element of destination value that could meet tourists' needs and wants.

Travel bloggers describe why a destination appeals to them in a complex way [55]. Travel motivation is not only influenced by pull factors, such as a destination's facilities and service, but may also include a number of other elements, such as its location and climate, as well as a comparison with alternative destinations. When tourists describe their niche travel motivation and other tourists comment on it, their motivation may contribute to new pull factors and add value to a destination. To illustrate this standpoint, the following extracts are collected from the blogs of informants 91 and 78, which demonstrate how bloggers' niche travel motivation is commented on by other tourists. This one-way interaction between bloggers and potential tourists leads to a co-creation of destination value when other potential tourists agree with a blogger's explanation and express a desire that they will visit the destination for similar reasons.

> *I travel to Gulangyu for a few weeks this time mainly because the winter in northern China is too cold. (B-91)*

> One tourist left comments for B-91: *Every year, I went to Hainan Island for spending the winter. After reading your travel blogs, I think I can spend this winter in Gulangyu.*

> *I've been to Taiwan in the past. I'd love to go back, but the current policy makes this inconvenient. So I chose Gulangyu mainly because its food, history and many other aspects are similar to Taiwan. (B-78)*

> One tourist left comments for B-78: *Taiwan has always been my planned travel itinerary. As you said, due to various reasons, it seems impossible to travel there so far. As an alternative tourist destination, I might go to Gulangyu Island first.*

4.2. Memorable Travel Experience at the Destination and Value Co-Creation

Travel bloggers commonly record their travel experiences in chronological order, so the most memorable experience during the trip usually makes up the main body of the blog [59]. Chinese tourists typically record their memorable travel experiences in Gulangyu by describing their preferred activities and emotional experiences at the destination.

Travel bloggers describe their preferred activities by comparing different attributes of a destination after their real visit to the destination, and they share their favorite activities with other members of online travel communities. Activity preference narratives reflect functional values on the degree to which tourism product, activity, or service has desirable characteristics, is unique, and performs as expected by tourists. As travel bloggers are composed of various types of tourists, they use different types of tourists' cognitive perceptions to evaluate how certain destination attributes led to their satisfied destination experiences.

The majority of tourists to Gulangyu visited several places on the island, but certain activities were popular with certain types of tourists. Young tourists and couples were often attracted to landmarks on Gulangyu island, such as Sunlight Rock and Shu Zhuang Garden. In comparison to historical attractions and buildings, beaches and aquariums are more appealing to tourists with children. For example, B-33 originally intended to take children to visit the museum, but he accidentally found the Gulangyu Aquarium instead, and spent an enjoyable half-day there. Unlike visitors from outside, local residents in Xiamen like visiting Gulangyu Concert Hall best, where internationally-renowned pianists

often perform in public. Local tourists also strongly encourage other music lovers to visit this attraction. As B-07 described, "This is my third time taking my youngest daughter to Gulangyu, also known as the Island of Pianos in Xiamen. The concert here is highly recommended for tourists who like music". At the same time, B-07's sharing was liked by many community members, and some tourists left a message asking about where the concert schedule can be found.

Travel bloggers contributed to destination value co-creation when they described their preferred activities and evaluated how specific destination attributes enhanced their destination experience with community members. A tourist destination has a number of attributes that attract tourists [60], but destination management organizations may not be able to identify all destination attributes and accordingly examine how well they perform for all tourists. However, travel bloggers are composed of various types of tourists, and their sharing can create elements for special interest tourism and increase the possibility of attracting more diverse types of tourists to a destination. As a World Heritage site, non-local tourists are normally more interested in its historical buildings, and rarely pay attention to the concert hall in Gulangyu. In the examples above, when local tourists mentioned that world-renowned musicians often perform at Gulangyu, it sparked the interest of other tourists, and Gulangyu will have the chance to attract more music lovers. Moreover, some attractions or activities may lack pertinent details on the official tourism website (e.g., the aquarium and beaches on Gulangyu), but are accidentally discovered, favored, and recommended by travel bloggers, thereby increasing potential tourists' cognition about the destination.

Memorable travel experiences are often linked with tourists' emotional responses, such as joy and relaxation that result from activities or specific characteristics of a destination. Destination emotional experience refers to the impressions and feelings that a tourist has for the destination [61]. Tourism destinations are rich in attributes able to evoke certain emotions. The emotional value of a destination is the utility, and is derived from tourists' feelings, attitudes, or perceptions generated by elements of the destination [62].

The emotional value can be co-created when travel bloggers convey positive feelings and emotions towards the destination. In the case of Gulangyu, the selected blogs exhibited overall positive feelings and emotions of the destination. The beautiful scenery (B-02), the sense of tranquility (B-60) and slow pace (B-68), and the architectural harmony of the Chinese and Western buildings in Gulangyu (B-57) led to the satisfaction of these travel bloggers. Travel bloggers can share emotional value with other community members (potential tourists) through destination emotional experience narratives, e.g., travel bloggers documenting how ordinary things, such as flowers, streets, beaches, and buildings, can inspire potential tourists to create an emotional bond with a destination. Therefore, the appeal of a tourism destination will be enhanced to potential tourists, thereby contributing to the creation of an emotional value for the destination. In the example below, a travel blogger recounted her emotional experience at Gulangyu, and how she felt about some specific elements of the destination. She then received comments from community members and thanks for sharing the 'slow time' at Gulangyu, which inspired them to aim for similar experiences.

> *Without automobiles or bicycles, Gulangyu island is a perfect place for couples to wander and experience slow life here . . . Sitting in the cafe and playing with the cats, I enjoy such a lazy and quiet holiday in Gulangyu. (B-60)*

One tourist left comments for B-60: *My boyfriend and I are looking for a vacation destination where we can relax and enjoy a slow weekend. Let's just bask in the sun and wander around the hotel. Your sharing makes us look forward to traveling to Gulangyu and having a similar experience.*

4.3. Travel Advice about the Destination and Value Co-Creation

Gulangyu travel bloggers often ended their blogs with travel advice. Typically, travel advice is related to the troubles or inconveniences they encountered while traveling, cover-

ing topics such as transportation, tickets, accommodation, and weather. Bloggers who offer travel advice based on their travel difficulties do not seek specific solutions or emotional support, but offer advice and provide an informative warning message to other potential tourists with the intention to help other tourists.

The sharing of travel advice includes knowledge-related aspects, such as relevant holiday attributes (e.g., tickets, hotels, and other attractions) and consumption-related skills at the destination. Bloggers demonstrate their knowledge based on real holiday experiences, and advise and guide potential tourists, who are in the process of choosing a holiday destination, to make informed decisions and prepare adequately for what might arise on their trip. Consistent with previous studies [44], this finding indicates that social media can strengthen social interaction or peer-to-peer communication, where consumers may exhibit a high level of altruism and provide others with useful information that may influence potential tourists' future travel decisions, behaviors, and destination experience [63]. As a result, travel advice shared by travel bloggers may lead to the co-creation of relational value for a destination, since such advice can help potential tourists avoid unpleasant experiences and unnecessary troubles at a destination.

Gulangyu Island is only accessible by ferry, so advice on the purchase of ferry tickets was repeatedly mentioned in the selected travel blogs. Even though the official website reminds tourists that they should purchase ferry tickets to Gulangyu online in advance, many tourists experienced problems booking ferry tickets. As B-77 described, "After we arrived at the pier and booked tickets through the official website, we couldn't buy the boat ticket in the morning. I strongly recommend that tourists buy boat tickets from the official website in advance." Likewise, B-60 and B-94 encountered similar troubles, so they strongly advised tourists to book ferry tickets well in advance to avoid having their plans changed, especially during the summer holidays when travel to Gulangyu is at its peak.

Travel advice, as a word-of-mouth process, often offers unique solutions to the "problem" of the intangibility of tourism products [64,65], since a prospective tourist may not fully understand a destination before they travel. Value is derived from interactions between bloggers (real-visit tourists) and other virtual communities (potential tourists). By learning from bloggers' experiences and answering other tourists' questions about travel advice given in blogs, travel blogs offer tourists an opportunity to exchange specific knowledge regarding holiday plans and consumption skills at a destination.

For many Gulangyu tourists, deciding whether to buy individual tickets for each tourism attraction or to purchase a package deal is a hesitant decision. B-82, a family traveler, used his experience to suggest, "Gulangyu island is quite big with many attractions that are worth visiting. We bought the package tickets, but we didn't visit all the places due to a lack of time. I suggest that tourists should buy tickets separately if they intend to stay just one day." In the comments section of the travel blog, several community members then asked relevant questions about the ticket purchase, and B-82 responded with some suggestions. Below is an example.

> One tourist left comments for B-82: *We are planning to take children to stay in Gulangyu for two days, will it be more appropriate to buy package tickets?*
>
> B-82: *It is still recommended to buy tickets separately because the scenic spots in the package are far from away each other, and if children have limited energy, you may not be able to visit all the attractions.*

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical/Conceptual Contributions

This study uses a consumer socialization framework to explore the destination value co-creation process in a Chinese context. The findings underscore the importance of tourists/customers as active actors in the value co-creation network, and social media as an important medium. Travel bloggers and their readers (other potential tourists) in online communities act as important socialization agents. As travel bloggers describe their travel experiences from the perspective of visitors to a destination, they might suggest attractions

that are not well promoted by the destination, or offer travel tips that are overlooked by destination management. If a large number of travel bloggers suggest a particular attraction or reflect some shortcomings in destination management, such travel information can serve as a valuable source of information for other tourists when making relevant travel decisions. Bloggers' sharing behaviors will also affect tourists' cognitive and emotional connections to a destination. In this way, the value of the co-creation of tourist destinations can be affected by the evaluations expressed on travel blogs. Destination co-creation, then, is an important outcome of the tourist socialization process. The value of Chinese tourists' heritage tourism experience in the process of destination value co-creation is presented in Figure 3.
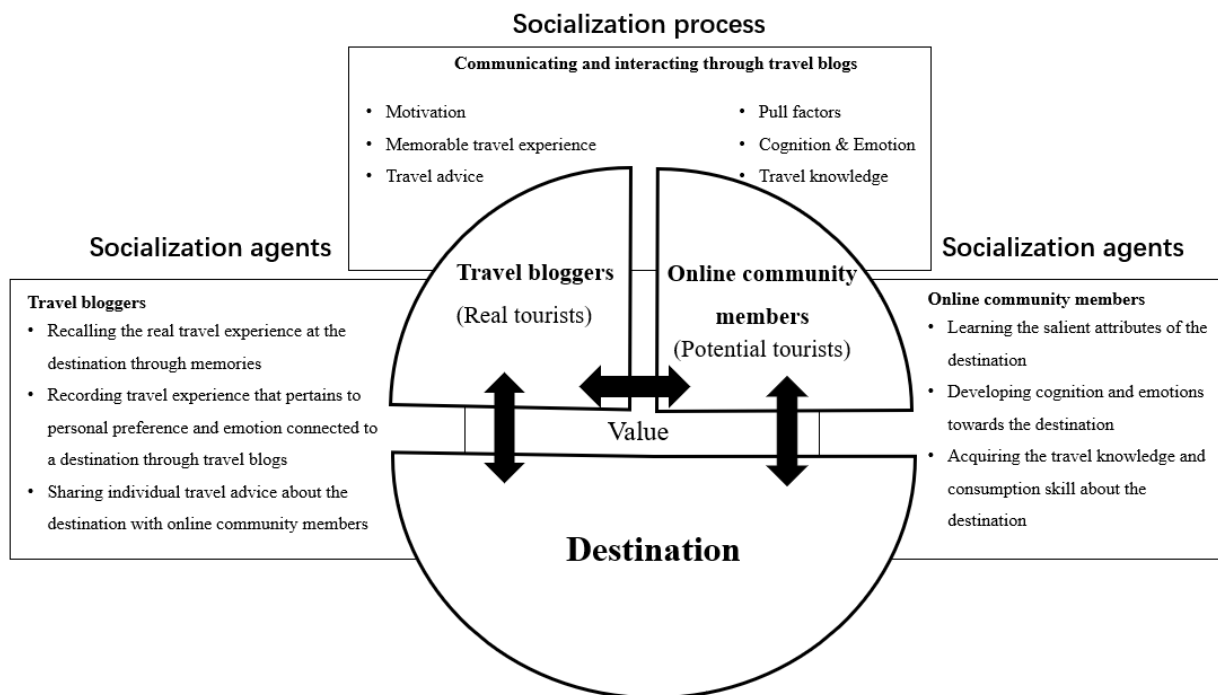

Figure 3. The co-creation of destination value through travel blogs.

In conclusion, the results support the notion that a tourism destination or organization is merely one of the many elements of the value ecosystem [66], and tourists are actively involved in co-creating, designing, as well as defining, their experience in numerous ways. Specifically, three recurrent themes in the travel blog narratives were identified, namely, motivation, memorable travel experience, and advice. Motivation involves descriptive recounting of how a tourist is attracted by destination-specific attributes. Memorable travel experiences describe how tourists relate to the destination, how attributes of the destination lead to their creation of memories, and how tourists perceive the characteristics of the destination. Travel advice reflects a travel blogger's attempt to convey informative messages to other consumers. The consumer socialization model suggests that contemporary travel bloggers are extending their online activities beyond self-stories into brand value generation, supporting the study of Oliveira and Panyik [33], who noted that social media were a means for bloggers to shape a destination brand collectively.

Consistent with recent studies on value co-creation in the customer-logic discourse [28,67], this study has found that narratives in travel blogs do not always directly relate to the tourism product or service offered, but may also contribute to co-creating certain elements of destination value. For example, we found that tourists' intrinsic motives for visiting Gulangyu, such as taking photos and relaxing, are not directly related to tourism service. However, they contribute to the understanding of the destination's salient attributes, and can be considered new push factors of motivation in cultural tourism, thereby enhancing the destination's functional value for tourists.

Moreover, this study reveals that memorable experiences can be key components in co-creating destination value. Memorable travel experience reflects tourists' cognitive and emotional immersion into the experience; such customer engagement contributes to value co-creation. Tourists' activity preferences are based on their reflections about their experience, and thus, it is crucial to the tourist experience that many present-day travelers are quite demanding. Connection to the destination is felt in form of personal relevance and emotional immersion [61,68]. In this study, the results are consistent with previous memory research [69] in revealing how shared experiences can help to create collective constructions of perceived value of a destination. For example, the perceived destination value of Gulangyu is that it is a historic place for young people, and a relaxing place with beaches for family tourists. This also reflects how contemporary travelers and bloggers automatically create their own market segments and add value to the destination market through sharing a memorable travel experience online, communicating with a substantial following, which may have an initial small effect on tourists' destination value recognition, and result in a major impact on tourists' willingness to visit.

Travel advice reflects a travel blogger's attempt to convey informative messages to other consumers, where value co-creation is accomplished through knowledge and consumption skill sharing. In addition to helping minimize risks associated with tourists, the findings reveal that travel advice is also beneficial to destination managers and tourism companies to build relationships with tourists. It allows them to avoid what Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres [70] refer to as value destruction. If the co-creation process is not managed appropriately, tourism resources may be misused, impeding the fulfillment of visitor expectations. This problem always arises in the context of co-creating experience. Therefore, tourism service providers need to develop a more rounded perception of tourists' expectations, and manage tourism resources appropriately to improve the co-creation process of on-site destination value.

Finally, the model presented helps to make a bridge between the social media interactions and choice of destination from the perspective of potential tourists. Previous studies indicate that social media influences prospective tourists' attitudes and decision-making processes [71–73]. The results of this study support the conclusion that online platforms influence tourists' decision-making beyond the tourists themselves, emphasizing its importance to the tourism organization and destination.

5.2. Managerial Implications

Tourism is experiential. Destinations and tourism service providers are striving to engage tourists in a value co-creation process and deliver a high-quality destination experience to remain competitive in the market [74]. In the era of interactive and participatory "Web 2.0" websites, the destination, if it wants to be successful in terms of drawing in tourists, should make full use of social platforms, including travel blogs, to: (a) better understand tourist perceptions and behavior; (b) improve the level of tourist destination engagement; and (c) facilitate contemporary consumers to co-produce their experience through spreading positive word-of-mouth recommendations among tourists. Although the tourism organization and destination can, directly or indirectly, impact tourist travel experience, the tourists themselves are part of the process of creating and, indeed, shaping their experiences [66].

Motivation is a key part of the initial destination value co-creation process, as it may directly influence tourists' choice of a vacation destination [20,75]. Tourists are salient co-creators of destination value. Motivation reflected in travel blogs explains how tourists are pulled by a particular set of destination attributes [76]. As such, travel blogs can be a good source of information for tourism marketers to find salient attributes and identify new areas of tourists' travel interests and destination image. On the one hand, destinations should encourage tourists to share more of their travel stories on social media with different angles to exhibit a destination's diversity for prospective tourists. Destinations, including heritage sites, should analyze travel blogs in-depth to develop a destination that offers

different or unique site-specific activities, thereby attracting a wide range of people from different segments.

Tourists' memorable travel experience is another important component for destination value co-creation. It reflects tourists' particular enthusiasm for a destination, and sets it apart from previous experiences, which may affect the directive function to revisit the destination [69]. Thus, destination managers could identify the emotional moods of tourists in travel blogs to strengthen tourists' attachment to the destination and provide additional support through the design of the official website. It would also be helpful for destination managers to re-examine the destination's tourism resources, such as restaurants, food markets, concert halls, and local exhibitions; give suitable technical assistance or marketing programs; and improve the destination's image.

It is evident that travel advice originating from tourists' actual travel experience supports the aim of travel bloggers of alerting people to all sorts of issues, including salient complaining practice. Thus, there is a need for tourism organizations to actively monitor peer communication, identify the types of tourist advice provided by travel blogs on various travel issues, and consider offering special travel products to meet potential tourists' demands. Such a strategy can facilitate high-quality peer communication by improving service quality and avoiding the potential co-destruction of destination value.

5.3. Limitations and Further Research Directions

There are several limitations to this research. Social media offer rich data on phenomenon research, but this analysis is not comprehensive, as the results are based on an examination of the contents of 97 Chinese travel blogs. Although bloggers' trip narratives and relevant comments are rich, it is important to bear in mind that the sample is not representative of all Chinese visitors. For example, the blogs may not have adequately covered the elder group of travelers. Second, in order to understand destination value co-creation in the context of a travel blog, this study did a practice-based analysis. As the study is exploratory in nature, we acknowledge that the three themes discussed (motivation, memorable travel experience, and travel advice) are limited to illustrative examples rather than a more comprehensive understanding of the Chinese heritage tourism experience. There is also scope for complementing the study findings through integrating other emerging contexts, such as eco-tourism and volunteer tourism, or other countries and (inter-) cultural settings.

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