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Co-Creation Tourism in an Ancient Chinese Town

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ABSTRACT

This study examines and presents co-creation as a possible action to prevent the ongoing decline of the Naxi ethnic minority due to mass tourism and commercialization in their ancient hometown of Lijiang. A co-creation theoretical model was developed to examine the antecedents and outcomes of co-creation experiences. A questionnaire survey of visitors to the Old Town showed that should co-creation tourism experiences be presented with the involvement of greater interaction, involvement, and the ability to share experiences, this could significantly influence visitor satisfaction, visit intensity, and desire to return. Perceived authenticity would not positively affect co-creation experiences though, revealing a lack of understanding of what Naxi culture was. The study advances cultural tourism understanding revealing co-creation, with visitors engaged in the co-production of their experiences as a viable elucidation to secure sustainable tourism development at this ancient setting.

中国古镇里的体验共创旅游

摘要

受大众旅游和旅游景点商业化影响大量纳西原住民已迁出世代居住的丽江古城。本研究探讨并呈现了体验共创可作为一项防止纳西人不断外迁的措施。为了检测旅游体验共创的前因和结果文章建立了一个体验共创的理论模型。一项对丽江古城游客的问卷调查显示如果共同创造的旅游体验能够呈现出更多的互动、参与和分享空间将会显著影响游客的满意度、游览强度以及重游意愿。然而由于缺乏对纳西文化的理解感知的文化真实性并不会积极地影响到旅游体验共创。本研究增进了对文化旅游的理解揭示了有游客参与合作生产的体验共创可确保在这个古老的环境中实现旅游业的可持续发展。

Introduction

Cultural tourism has grown in popularity as visitors extend their wish to experience more through some level of participation and education at the destination (Ohridska-Olson & Ivanov, 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Defining cultural tourism has proven difficult since there is no unambiguous definition of what 'culture' means (Mousavi,

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Doratli, Mousavi, & Moradiahari, 2016), although there is some agreement that cultural tourism will involve merging the cultural products of the past within the lifestyles of people today (Mousavi et al., 2016; Richards, 2001). While the growth and expansion of cultural tourism have stimulated cultural development this has simultaneously generated negative effects and in particular the commercialization of culture (Swanson & Timothy, 2012; Taylor, 2001). A response to this adverse trend in cultural tourism development has been the emergence of creative tourism and the co-creation of experiences between host and visitor. It is also the subject of this study on the ancient town of Lijiang in Yunnan Province, China. Richards and Wilson (2006) argued that while physical resources such as buildings and sites cannot be completely resorted once they are damaged, creative resources such as processes and experiences are infinitely renewable. The 'Old Town of Lijiang', an UNESCO World Heritage site, has in recent years experienced a high level of commercialization and overcrowding, significantly displacing the native Naxi culture, one of the ethnic minority cultures that exist within China. Issues of culture misuse to create greater commercial benefits from growing numbers of tourists as well as unregulated outlets with little variety and specialty have emerged in this ancient town (Li & Shao, 2005). Based on data collected from visitors to the Old Town, this study identified the antecedents and outcomes from co-creation experiences showing this to be a possible viable and sustainable approach to tourism management at the location. The findings are particularly significant in that such an approach of co-creation strategy could be considered as a key part of sustainable tourism development in the numerous ancient towns throughout China that continue to open and display their cultural assets to growing numbers of tourists. There is debate on what role ethnic tourism has in the rejuvenation of ethnic cultures in China. Rather than displaying some level of rustic impression, Chinese ethnic minorities are increasingly rebranding commercially for tourism, providing reconstructed ethnic culture and historical buildings and artifacts, which have less to do with the distinctiveness of the culture but more on providing an environment aimed at tourism consumerism (Oakes, 2016). For the Naxi people, tourism development has also led to exclusion and displacement with the ethnic members migrating away from the old town. Co-creation experiences require the presence and interaction of ethnic residents. This research specifically investigated visitor engagement and involvement during their time within the old town and their experiences from this, importantly providing a direction for co-creation tourism and future sustainable ethnic tourism development in the town.

Creative tourism and the co-creation of experiences

Cultural tourism is a major segment of global tourism through the presentation of iconic structures, cultural events, and cultural thematization such as cultural routing and pathways, heritage zones and centers (Richards, 2010). The cultural tourism literature has shown a distinction between cultural tourists who actively seek out cultural attractions and locations, and those cultural visitors who are not culturally motivated but visit the site as a secondary or minor purpose (McKercher, 2004). While acknowledging the complexity of cultural tourist behavior, determining the tourists'

purposes for consuming culture is a fundamental consideration on the development of an appealing promotion of the cultural tourism product (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011).

Given the dependency of many destinations on using their heritage sites to promote cultural tourism and heritage industries, Buonincontri, Marasco, and Ramkissoon (2017). conceptualized a sustainable visitor behavior framework based on a theoretical interrelationship between visitor experience and place attachment. In advancing the research into sustainable tourism development at heritage locations and the experiences of visitors, Buonincontri et al. (2017), concluded on the importance of investigating the role of authenticity in the visitor exchange. In terms of destination marketing, visitors can become emotionally attached when they encounter existential authenticity and while research would be needed to understand how visitors experience and use their knowledge of authenticity, the presentation of place authenticity could provide a commanding marketing tactic (Jiang, Ramkissoon, Mavondo, & Feng, 2017).

UNESCO presents cultural tourism as a strategic measure to preserve world heritage, and while cultural tourism has expanded to include a diverse mix of tangible and intangible offerings created in part by communities wishing to reclaim their heritage, with this, a homogenization of culture has emerged (Richards, 2007). Considering the vulnerability of tangible and intangible culture resources at a destination as tourism develops, a key concern is ensuring the sustainable management of these traditional cultural elements (Markwick, 1999; McCool & Moisey, 2001). Sustainable tourism is accomplished when equated to three central issues, namely; the optimum use of environmental resources, respecting the socio-cultural authenticity of the host community, and that the tourism project is financially viable to sustain long-term economic operations (UNWTO, 2005). It has been suggested that creative tourism can be linked to sustainable development aims. Unlike tangible cultural resources requiring perhaps costly preservation and maintenance, creativity can generate innovation rapidly avoiding serial reproduction (Korez-Vide, 2013). Creative tourism promotes the authenticity of local culture and can avoid damaging physical heritage resources while still generating revenues through creating greater value to the travel experience (Korez-Vide, 2013). Creative resources are also arguably infinitely renewable (Richards & Wilson, 2006).

Creative tourism advocates visitors moving beyond the static observation of cultural spectacles whereby they seek out a level of participation, education, and experiences from their location (Ohridska-Olson & Ivanov, 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Richards and Marques (2012) showed that creative tourism produces a strong link between tourists and residents thereby not only enhancing social relations, but also creating value through these encounters. Importantly creative tourism permits tourists and local service providers to jointly produce value found in products, services, and experience (Richards, 2009). It has been argued that creativity follows after economic development has been secured or where there is a lack of cultural capital leaving creativity as one of the few alternatives to cultural development (Richards & Wilson, 2007). Creative tourism takes place within creative spaces or places of creation. One challenge is in transforming cultural tourism to creative tourism, whereby an inventory of local skills and cultural resources are identified and there is a process of engaging community artisans while stimulating the interest

of visitors to interact with these ethnic groups (Richards, Wisansing, & Paschinger, 2018). Through this active participation in learning experiences when visiting a destination, tourists can develop their creative potential and with this involvement, achieve a greater level of perceived authenticity of experiences (Richards, 2009; Richards & Raymond, 2000). These immersive interactions between perhaps a local ethnic handicraft worker or artist and tourists develop to a co-creation of experiences. This collaborative process in tourism has been termed as 'co-creation tourism' distinguishing creative tourism from traditional cultural tourism. Mutual social and monetary value is collectively produced from this tourism co-creation experience. Recent tourism emphasis has seen an increasing examination on how tourists achieve greater bonding with their host community, and through these community connections, the tourists are transformed and the lives of the locals are improved (People First Tourism, 2018). As a practical initiative, People First Tourism outlines that host communities have knowledge and passion requiring mentoring and support from empathetic visitors, not those wishing to exploit or act in a predatory manner which in the end negatively impacts the visitor to host experiences and exchanges as well as revenues (People First Tourism, 2018).

Co-creation is a grassroots tactic for engaging tourists in experiences with communities that involves a transfer of skills and knowledge in the process (Agrawal & Rahman, 2015). It is a process that enables tourists to construct their own experiences at the destination, a process that was examined and central to this study. While a creative process occurs, it is co-creation tourism that becomes integral to destination marketing and positioning strategy. Authentic cultural resources connected to the host Naxi ethnic tribe are being slowly eroded due to mass tourism visitation. Naxi tribal numbers in the town are consequently in decline. The implications for this research are especially relevant when considering the many ancient town settings throughout China attracting increasing numbers of tourists. The presentation of co-creation experiences could be a solution to achieve sustainable tourism development and in the case of the Old Town of Lijiang beyond the theoretical model that was developed in this study, be a viable pragmatic measure to reverse the ongoing damage to the town's cultural resources.

Tourism in the Old Town of Lijiang

The 'Old Town of Lijiang' located in northwest Yunnan Province was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Centre in 1997. The town is comprised of three housing clusters, namely, the Baisha and Shuhe areas and the Dayan Old Town established during the Ming Dynasty in the early 13th century, with an ancient complex water system that still functions (UNESCO, 2018). Unlike other ancient towns in China, the Old Town of Lijiang has no city wall with streets and houses built along the original system of waterways. The Naxi is the majority ethnic group, and while the architecture, artwork, and religion are depicted throughout the Old Town of Lijiang, most of the indigenous residents have moved out, increasingly displaced by the affects of commercialization and tourism. With 30,000 indigenous people in the Old Town in 1996, this had dropped to only 6000 by 2010 (Cui et al., 2011). Recognizing the Old Town as a popular tourism-oriented city now, Cui et al. (2011) highlight the increased pressure put on the Old Town by urban sprawling and

tourism, which had surpassed 9 million visitors by 2010. Mass tourism arrivals have brought increasing pressure and a continued deterioration not just to intangible culture but also to the environment, and particularly the water quality. The ancient Naxi have a unique talent in the arts, dance, music, and handicrafts in China. The most famous is Dongba paper the world's only living pictograph and paper-making technique termed 'Naxi Dongba'. This ancient handicraft was listed by the Chinese Ministry of Culture under 'Traditional Arts' within the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of China' in 2006 (Chinese Cultural Studies Center, 2018). While there are efforts to retain and preserve the Naxi culture within its hometown, many authentic traditions have failed to be handed down. This is in part due to an increasing commodification of the Old Town for tourism development, and a basis of this study.

Overcrowding continues at the Old Town especially in the evening due to the many bars and clubs that have emerged. This has created an atmosphere of a 'theme park' detached from that of the UNESCO World Heritage citation (Salerno, 2017). A few tourism phenomena have emerged further exasperating the situation. While previously appealing to overseas tourists, domestic mass tourism has dramatically increased to the Old Town. Fewer foreign tourists are visiting the Old Town finding the congested setting less appealing. Reaching an annual growth rate of 70% in 2006, by 2016 the rate of foreign visitor arrivals to the Old Town had dropped to 1% growth. Total tourist arrivals in 2006 to the Old Town were less than 500,000, but by 2016 had increased to over 3.5 million with substantial domestic visitation (Lijiang Government丽江市人民政府门户网站, 2017). Li's (2004) research on heritage conservation efforts at the Old Town commented on several challenges. These included overcrowding by tourists, a loss of authenticity with cultural resources used for commercial gain and unregulated retail with little variety and overpricing, as well as a tourist experience diminished by unappealing traditional performances, expensive eateries and a lack of information from tour guides, signage. These factors overall provided limited engagement with the local culture and the Naxi people. Naxi displaced from the Old Town have been replaced with migrant shopkeepers with limited or no knowledge of traditional culture.

In an attempt to protect the tangible and intangible heritage in the Old Town, the Heritage Conservation and Management Committee (HCMC) was founded. This municipal organization developed a 'Master Conservation Plan' (MCP) with the principal aims of creating a livable city for both natives and tourists, and promoting a congruent co-existence between the old town and the new developments while minimizing negative impacts (Global Heritage Fund, 2006). Part of this was the 'Specific Plan for Traditional Commercial Culture Protection and Management' which provided a demarcation map of the Old Town of Lijiang (Image 1) and particularly a buffer zone with the intend to safeguard the authenticity and integrity of the entire zone and wherein various regulations on conducting business could be more strictly applied (Su, 2010). The Old Town Preservation Fee (OTPF) was implemented in 2001 as a surcharge to visitors entering the zone with revenues to be used specifically for architecture, infrastructure, and intangible cultural preservation. The surcharge has created ongoing controversy and debate among the various stakeholders in the Old Town on whether the fee charge can actually help protect
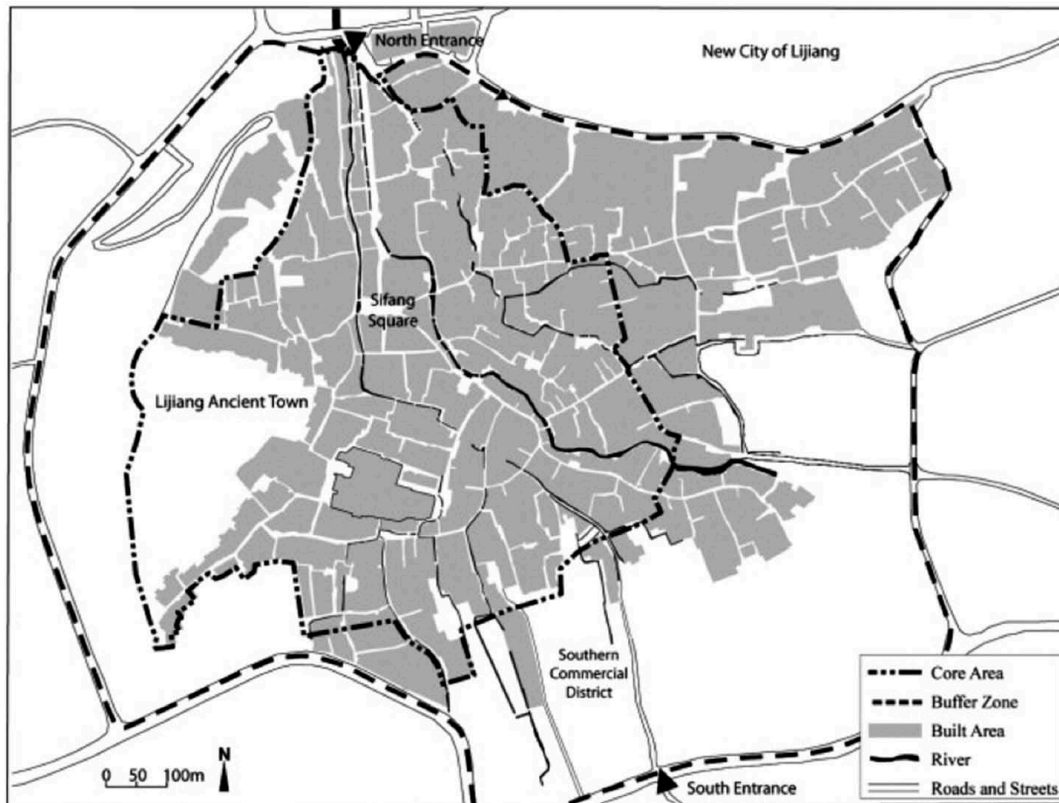
Image 1. Demarcation map of the Old Town of Lijiang (Su, 2010).

the ancient site with significant amounts being lost through evasion including bank debts left unpaid by the committee (Zhou, 2009).

Despite government intervention and attempts to offset the negative impacts on the Naxi tribe, the demands of an increasing number of tourists to the location has created greater pressure on preserving tangible and intangible heritage. Describing tourism as a complex adaptive system, Fodness (2017) suggests that while sustainable tourism issues are perhaps easy to analysis, the outcomes are almost impossible to predict. Consequently, traditional means to sustainable tourism problems are in fact resilient to traditional problem-solving approaches. While some sustainable tourism problems may be simple or have a degree of structure and order, the complex context that sustainable tourism challenges occur implies an attempt to solve these through traditional means can have limited and perhaps counterproductive consequences (Fodness, 2017). This study recognizes that a new approach is needed, thereby advocating co-creation as an effective means to manage cultural tourism at the Old Town and particularly the healthy interaction this can create between ethnic hosts and visitors.

Research agenda – the antecedents and outcomes of co-creation experiences

Literature has emphasized the business benefits of engaging consumers in co-creation activities in tactical areas such as creating and enhancing loyalty and lowering costs (Sheth, Sisodia, & Sharma, 2000); improving customization (Auh, Bell, McLeod, & Shih,

2007); increasing a desire to spend more (Buonincontri, Morvillo, Okumus, & van Niekerk, 2017); and stimulating innovation and contribution from consumers (Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008). Füller et al. (2008) also found that the level of interest and passion by the consumer to be innovative and willing to interact with the producers determined the level of involvement. This evolution from co-creation experiences is a new means to bring value to the tourist and host interaction and experience generating process. It is a cooperative process that can connect the tourism stakeholders psychologically and emotionally (Mathis, Kim, Uysal, Sirgy, & Prebensen, 2016)

A review of creative and co-creation tourism literature has revealed several possible antecedents and outcomes. The antecedents of co-creation from the literature have been shown to be: active involvement (Mathisen, 2013); development of skills and creativity (Tan, Kung, & Luh, 2013); degree of perceived authenticity (Brida, Disegna, & Scuderi, 2014); interaction with local people (Furenes, Øgaard, & Gjerald, 2017); and the sharing of experiences at tourism destinations (Buonincontri, Marasco, et al., 2017). The outcomes of co-creation experiences were: tourist's satisfaction with the experience (Hidayati & Novani, 2015); tourist's visit intensity (Hoyer, Chandy, Dorotic, Krafft, & Singh, 2010) and tourist's future intention (Hurriyati & Sofwan, 2016). This research is particularly significant in that it adopts for the first time a holistic approach, examining all these co-creation experiences and outcome possibilities to determine which factors in particular were of significance to the visitor experience at the ancient town. Through isolating specific co-creation factors of greatest importance to the visitor will have implications on how to best create sustainable tourism development strategy in the Old Town in the future.

Antecedents of co-creation experiences in tourism

| Active involvement of tourists | Development of skills and creativity | The degree of perceived authenticity | Interaction with local people | Sharing experiences |

H1 (+)   H2 (+)   H3 (+)   H4 (+)   H5 (+)

Co-creation in tourism

H6 (+)   H7 (+)   H8 (+)

| Tourists' satisfaction with the experience | Tourists' visit intensity | Tourists' future intention |

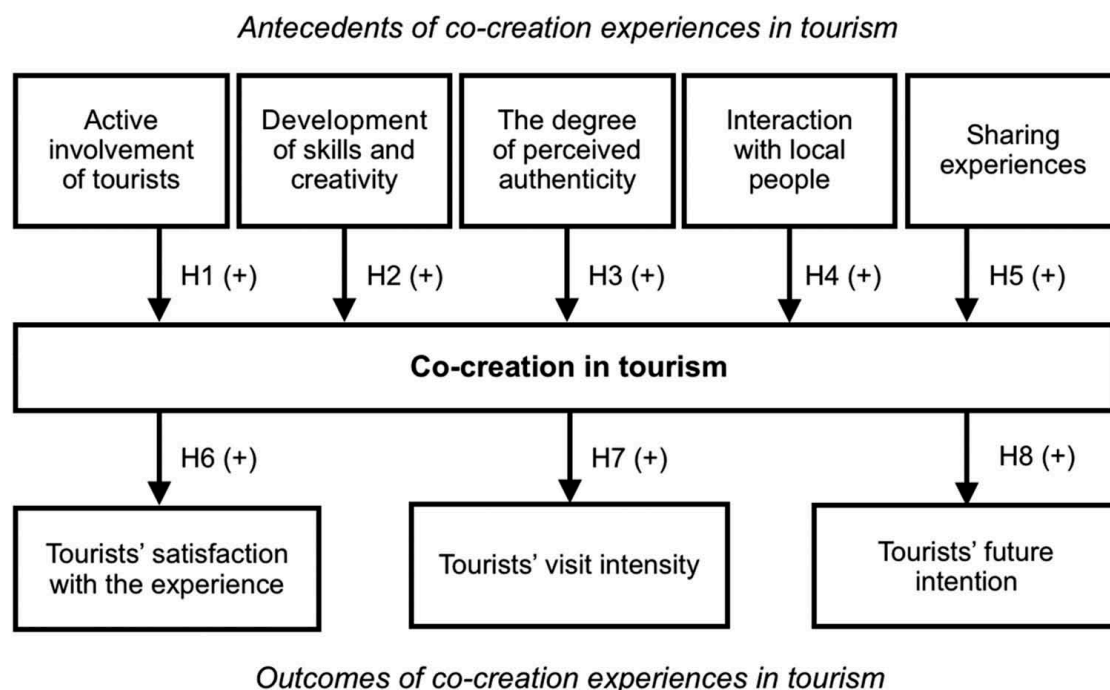*Outcomes of co-creation experiences in tourism*

Figure 1. Theoretical model and the hypotheses.

A theoretical model and hypotheses were developed for this research based on the five key antecedents of co-creation experience identified in the literature and the three possible outcomes from these co-creation experiences (Figure 1). Each of these hypotheses was investigated in the research.

Active involvement in the tourism experience

The level of involvement, interaction and active participation in co-creation tourism is higher than other forms of tourism (Richards & Wilson, 2007). Tourists in the co-creation experience will go beyond content provided by others to seek out, select, judge and create content for themselves. Co-creation can be differentiated from customization in that co-creation is collaboratively generated when consumers are actively involved from the beginning of the process (Kristensson, Matthing, & Johansson, 2008). In the co-creation process, the level of active or passive involvement between tourists and service providers will depend on who dominants the interaction (Mathis et al., 2016). Tourists who are passively involved in activities will be less interested in the co-creation interaction. Based on the premise that active involvement may impact the co-creation experience the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: The active involvement of tourists during the tourism experience positively affects the co-creation experience

Development of skills and creativity

Creativity-based tourism products and services encourage creative tourists to become active co-creators and co-producers of their own experience (Martini & Buffa, 2016; Richards, 2011). Previous studies have found that the creative ability of people determines the degree of engagement in the co-creation process. The more creative the tourist is, the more active the participation (Füller, Hutter, & Faullant, 2011). As tourists become increasingly discerning, wishing to seek ways to discover and develop skills during travel, this motivation has shaped creative tourism (Tan et al., 2013). Therefore, the ability to learn and create during the visit to the Old Town was examined with the following hypothesis:

H2: Developing skills and creative potential during the tourism experience positively affects the co-creation experience.

Degree of perceived authenticity

Authenticity in the tourism industry means a genuine, real, unique and local indigenous cultural experience (Fletcher, Pfoor, & Bruecker, 2016). The perception of authenticity varies with each individual as they assess the value gained from cultural attractions and their own expectations from the experience. Brida et al. (2014) suggest that it is through learning, exploring and creating that visitors acquire a perceived authenticity of experience. Perceived authenticity provides destination competitive advantage (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010, 2011) and can impact the traveler's repurchase intentions and visit satisfaction (Ramkissoon, 2015).

In the case of the Old Town, the issue of perceived authenticity will be on the co-creation experiences provided by 'real' Naxi cultural elements with the following hypothesis examined:

H3: The degree of perceived authenticity positively affects the co-creation experience in tourism.

Interaction with local people

Furenes et al. (2017) illustrated how the enjoyment of co-creation could be enhanced through interacting with others during the visit, particularly face-to-face interactions. Grönroos (2011) suggested that the interaction between suppliers and consumers occurs simultaneously. Creative tourists seek out more interactive experiences to meet their personal visit expectations. Without this interaction and platform to exchange knowledge and information between consumer and producer, co-creation experiences will be limited (Buonincontri, Marasco, et al., 2017). Given that the level of interaction between tourists and local people has been shown to impact the visit experience a fourth hypothesis was proposed:

H4: The interaction with local people positively affects the co-creation experience in tourism.

Sharing of experiences

Previous research has highlighted the significance of sharing in creating meaningful experiences for tourists. Etgar (2008) found that several social benefits could be derived from co-creation including enhancing social status and social esteem as well as the ability for more co-creation opportunities through sharing ideas and experiences on social media. The advancement of technology has meant that the process of sharing experiences continues to increase (Buonincontri, Marasco, et al., 2017). With the ability of tourists to more easily engage in the creating, editing and distribution of co-production experiences, the final hypothesis proposed that the ability to share experiences with others could impact the co-creation experience:

H5: Sharing experiences with others positively affects co-creation experiences in tourism

Outcomes of co-creation experiences – tourist satisfaction

Antón, Camarero, and Laguna-Garciá (2017) found that a high level of satisfaction is achieved when the expectations of tourists are reached. The co-creation process permits consumers to express negative or positive feelings directly to service providers, enabling the providers to better recognize and respond promptly to consumer needs, particular service failings and complaints, to better fulfill expectations (Hidayati & Novani, 2015). Examining the relationship between co-creation and customer satisfaction at a spa, Navarro, Llianares, and Garzon

(2016) found that while no variable alone such as information sharing and personal interaction was necessary to generate user satisfaction, they found that in the absence of variables such as feedback, advocacy and helping, caused dissatisfaction. Since it is suggested that co-creation will impact tourist satisfaction the following hypothesis was tested:

H6: Co-creation experiences in tourism positively affects the tourist's satisfaction with the experience

Visit intensity and future intentions

Visit intensity in the literature has been measured based on tourist's expenditure and length of stay (Antón et al., 2017). Rather than viewing, observing and contemplating, creative tourists interact and co-produce the visitor experience. Consumers are inclined to pay more for this extra value (Chang, 2018; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The value is occurring while the consumer is physically and emotionally engaged in the co-creation process (Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008). Cossío-Silva, Revilla-Camacho, Vega-Vázquez, and Palacios-Florencio (2016) suggest that value resulting from co-creation will positively and directly influence loyalty. While not referring to the co-creation concept, Kim, Han, Holland, and Byon (2008) explain the importance of including involvement in the visitor's experience as a means to enhance destination brand equity, satisfaction and ultimately the willingness to spend and intention to revisit. The following two hypotheses were therefore proposed and measured as part of the visitor's co-creation experience:

H7: Co-creation experiences in tourism positively effects visit intensity.

H8: Co-creation in tourism positively affects future visit intentions.

Methodology

A survey technique was employed within the Old Town of Lijiang. This method and location have been employed previously to investigate tourism to host interactions between the hosts in the Old Town and visitors (Salazar & Zhang, 2013; Su & Teo, 2008; Wang, 2007). In this study, a quantitative approach was used to collect the research data. A self-administered structured questionnaire divide into two sections was employed examining the co-creation constructs in Figure 1. The questionnaire was introduced by explaining the aim, anonymity and voluntary nature of the survey to the potential respondent. Section 1 assessed the degree of co-creation experiences using the 5 antecedents of co-creation and 3 co-creation outcomes with 24 questions in total from the literature (Table 1). All the items in the theoretical model were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scaling ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The final section was comprised of four demographic variables (age, gender, hometown, and monthly income) and four questions about trip characteristics (the purpose of the visit, the length of stay, travel companions and level of familiarity with the destination).

Table 1. Measurement of the study constructs.

Latent constructs and measures	Authors
Degree of experience co-creation	
I have used my experience from previous trips in order to make this trip better.	Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer (2012)
I predominantly arranged this trip by myself.	
I have spent a considerable amount of time on making this trip unique.	
Active involvement of the tourist during the experience	
My tourism experience was enhanced because of my participation in cultural and tourist activities.	Mathis et al. (2016); Buonincontri, Marasco, et al. (2017)
I enjoy taking a hands-on approach during my tourism experience.	
I like to be informed of what goes into my travel experience.	
Developing skills and creativity during the experience	
I feel more confident to myself after this trip	Tan et al. (2013)
I think my experience is challenging and with risk.	
I explored my potential through learning in this trip.	
Degree of perceived authenticity	
I enjoy local ways of life which is significantly different with other places.	Ramkissoon and Uysal (2011)
I will buy the souvenirs made by local hands.	
I was allowed to interact with local community.	
Interaction with local people	
I have directly interacted with local service providers during the organization of my trip (by phone, e-mail, etc.).	Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer (2012); Mathis et al. (2016)
I have been motivated by local service providers regarding the organization of my trip.	
I felt confident in my ability to collaborate with local service providers.	
Sharing experience with others	
I have shared my tourism experience with others during this trip.	Hsu and Lin (2008)
I will tell others about the tourism experience I have had during this trip.	
I experienced pleasure while participating in social media.	
Satisfaction with experience	
Overall, I am very satisfied with the visit to this destination.	Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer (2012)
The experience I gained in this trip has met my expectations.	
Visit intensity (money and time)	
When I have extra money, I am likely to spend it on a tourism experience.	Antón et al. (2017)
I prefer to spend more time for a more involving tourism experience.	
Future intention	
I intend to revisit this destination within next five years.	Kim et al. (2008)
I would like to further engage in future trips	

Analytical technique

Chinese simplified characters and English versions of the questionnaires were used in the Old Town. The Chinese version was reverse translated from the original English text to help ensure questions had the same meaning. An initial pilot conducted a week previously on 30 respondents at the Old Town lead to some minor adjustments and refinement in the Chinese worded questions. Table 1 shows the 24 questions that were asked in the questionnaire from literature specifically related to co-creation tourism experiences (Table 1). A team of 10 postgraduate students conducted the full-scale research over a few days approaching potential respondents randomly in the Square Market at the center of the Old Town of Lijiang. Three of the students were local but studying abroad, while the other seven students were from the nearby universities. The survey lasted 5 days during the winter holiday. With a response rate of 79%, and after a filter to exclude surveys with missing data, 312 completed questionnaires were used

Table 2. Respondent demographic and trip characteristics (*n* = 312).

Variables	N	Variables	N
Gender		*Purpose of travel*	
Male	120 (38.5%)	Leisure	288 (92.3%)
Female	192 (61.5)	VFR	7 (2.2)
		Business	8 (2.6)
Age		Other	9 (2.9)
18–35	257 (82.4%)		
36–45	29 (9.3)	*Travel companion*	
46–55	19 (6.1)	Family	71 (22.8%)
56–65	6 (1.9)	Friends	109 (34.9)
>65	1 (0.3)	Partner/spouse	61 (19.6)
		Group	9 (2.9)
Hometown		Alone	52 (16.7)
Yunnan	81 (26.0%)	Other	10 (3.2)
Guangdong	42 (13.5)		
Sichuan	24 (7.7)	*Length of stay*	
Hong Kong/Macao/Taiwan	6 (1.8)	1 night	35 (11.2%)
Foreign countries	9 (3)	2–3 nights	142 (45.5)
Other regions in China	150 (48.1)	4–7 nights	92 (29.5)
		>7 nights	43 (13.8)
Monthly income (RMB)			
Less than 5,000	124 (39.8%)	*Visits to Old Town*	
5,001–10,000	125 (40.1)	First time	198 (63.5%)
10,001–20,000	38 (12.2)	1–2 times previously	69 (22.1)
>20,000	25 (8)	More than 2 times	45 (14.4)

for final analysis. The research was introduced as an academic study to examine co-creation experiences.

Findings

The results showed that around two-thirds of the respondents were female (61.5%) and were between the ages of 18 to 35 (Table 2). Almost half of the respondents were from three provinces in China. Twenty-six percent of the respondents were from the home province of Yunnan while 13.5% and 7.7% were from Guangdong and Sichuan provinces, respectively. Foreign visitors made up only 3% of the respondents an indication of the diminished appeal of the Old Town for international travelers. Hong Kong and Macao, both Special Administrative Regions within China and Taiwan, are not considered foreign territories by the Chinese authorities and was similarly applied to the definition of the foreigner in this survey. The respondents had mostly a monthly income less than RMB10,000 (79.9%) and had traveled to the Old Town for leisure purposes (92.3%). While 34.9% and 22.8% were traveling with friends and family, respectively, 16.7% were traveling alone. There were no day-trippers with 45.5% staying between 2 and 3 nights. There are several inns within the Old Town as well as hotel accommodation outside the Old Town zone. The Old Town is attracting a mostly younger and lower income visitor. As discussed in the literature, an image perception of the Old Town at night is of bars and clubs a number of which are now located in the old buildings. This factor could explain the high percentage of younger visitor demographic.

The results from the Likert-type scaling of the experience constructs (Table 3) showed that the leading measures were the intent to tell others about their tourism

Table 3. Leading experience constructs.

Latent constructs	Mean	Standard deviation
I will tell others about the tourism experience I have had during this trip.	4.48	0.708
When I have extra money, I am likely to spend it on a tourism experience.	4.44	0.768
I have shared my tourism experience with others during this trip.	4.37	0.728
I prefer to spend more time for a more involving tourism experience.	4.36	0.871
I would like to further engage in future trips	4.35	0.846
Overall, I am very satisfied with the visit to this destination.	4.33	0.801
I experienced pleasure while participating in social media.	4.27	0.881
I enjoy local ways of life that are significantly different with other places.	4.25	0.905
The experience I gained in this trip has met my expectations.	4.13	0.924
I was allowed to interact with local community.	4.11	0.915
I enjoy taking a hands-on approach during my tourism experience.	4.08	1.095
I like to be informed of what goes into my travel experience.	4.08	1.102
I predominantly arranged this trip by myself.	4.04	1.208
I feel more confident to myself after this trip	4.01	1.008
I will buy the souvenirs made by local hands.	3.97	1.019
I intend to revisit this destination within the next five years.	3.90	1.236
I think my experience is challenging and with risk.	3.79	1.193
I have used my experience from previous trips in order to make this trip better.	3.77	1.207
My tourism experience was enhanced because of my participation in cultural and tourist activities	3.72	1.282
I explored my potential through learning in this trip.	3.67	1.185
I have directly interacted with local service providers during the organization of my trip.	3.59	1.334
I felt confident in my ability to collaborate with local service providers.	3.43	1.225
I have spent a considerable amount of time on making this trip unique.	3.20	1.179
I have been motivated by local service providers regarding the organization of my trip.	2.82	1.446

experiences at the Old Town (M = 4.48, SD = 0.708), the desire to spend more on tourism experiences (M = 4.44, SD = 0.768), and that they had already shared their tourism experiences (M = 4.37, SD = 0.728). The respondent would spend more time on a more involved tourism experience (M = 4.36, SD = 0.871). The visitor was fairly neutral on being motivated by local service providers regarding the preparation for the visit (M = 2.82, SD = 1.446) and only slightly agreed that he or she had spent time to make this trip unique (M = 3.20, SD = 1.179) as well as a minor agreement on the level of confidence on his or her ability to collaborate with local service providers (M = 3.43, SD = 1.225)

Exploratory factor analysis

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation was conducted to test the hypothesized casual relationship among the underlying constructs in the theoretical model. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was 0.865 and Barlett's test of sphericity was $p < 0.001$ thereby confirming it was appropriate to assess the factor analysis. The eight-factor solution accounted for 58.3% of the total variance of the items and Cronbach's alpha was high ranging between 0.679 and 0.874 within the factors. The degree of co-creation experience construct had a high degree of internal consistency.

During the EFA (Table 4) the factor matrix was improved by eliminating the item 'my tourism experience was enhanced because of my participation in cultural and

Table 4. Result of exploratory factor analysis.

Latent constructs	Items	Factor loadings	Eigenvalue	Cumulative variance explained (%)	Cronbach's alpha
Active involvement of the tourist during the experience	I enjoy taking a hands-on approach during my tourism experience.	0.688	1.161	9.144	0.679
	I like to be informed of what goes into my travel experience.	0.580			
Visit intensity (money and time)	When I have extra money, I am likely to spend it on a tourism experience.	0.613	1.501	8.473	0.738
	I prefer to spend more time for a more involving tourism experience.	0.748			
Degree of co-creation experience	I have used my experience from previous trips in order to make this trip better.	0.606	1.637	8.350	0.77
	I predominantly arranged this trip by myself.	0.748			
	I have spent a considerable amount of time on making this trip unique.	0.575			
Degree of perceived authenticity	I enjoy local ways of life that are significantly different with other places.	0.503	1.729	7.216	0.758
	I will buy the souvenirs made by local hands.	0.656			
	I was allowed to interact with local community.	0.699			
Satisfaction with experience	Overall, I am very satisfied with the visit to this destination.	0.826	1.732	7.206	0.874
	The experience I gained in this trip has met my expectations.	0.773			
Interaction with local people	I have directly interacted with local service providers during the organization of my trip.	0.712	2.004	6.823	0.782
	I have been motivated by local service providers regarding the organization of my trip.	0.736			
	I felt confident in my ability to collaborate with local service providers.	0.700			
Sharing experience with others	I have shared my tourism experience with others during this trip.	0.731	2.033	6.255	0.822
	I will tell others about the tourism experience I have had during this trip.	0.830			
	I experienced pleasure while participating in social media.	0.615			
Developing skills and creativity during the experience	I feel more confident to myself after this trip	0.767	2.195	4.837	0.826
	I think my experience is challenging and with risk	0.732			
	I explored my potential through learning in this trip.	0.701			

tourist activities', which had a low factor loading of 0.293. The items 'I intend to revisit this destination within the next five years' and 'I would like to further engage in my future trip' were not grouped into one factor but used as two likely outcomes of the co-creation experience as proposed in hypotheses 7 and 8.

The construct 'active involvement of the tourist during the experience' explained 9.144% of the variance. This construct contained two factors confirming that the visitor enjoyed having a hands-on approach during the tourism experience and preferred to be informed on what goes into the travel experience. The construct 'visit intensity' in terms of money and time spent explained 8.473% of the variance with the visitor showing a willingness to spend more money and time if this was based on enhancing tourism experiences. The 'degree of co-creation experience' construct explained 8.350 of the variance with three factors. The respondents would use the experience from previous trips to make the current trip better, as well as predominantly arranging the trip themselves and taking a considerable amount of time to make the trip special.

Confirmatory factor analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted (Table 5) to generate a measurement model from the data and assessed to determine if the measurement model was a good fit. The item 'I have been motivated by local providers regarding the organization of my trip' was removed as this had a low factor loading less than 0.6. The goodness-of-fit (GFI) index was 0.934 showing a reasonable model fit. This was greater than the cut-off value of 0.9 recommended by Jöeskog and Sörbom (1984). According to Browne and Cudeck (1992) the smaller the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) the better the model fit. In this case RMSEA = 0.043 was lower than 0.05 and therefore expressed a good fit. Bentler (1990) and Bollen (1989) recommended a comparative fit index (CFI) value close to 1 and normed fit index (NFI) threshold of 0.9, respectively. The measurement model had a CFI = 0.968 and an NFI = 0.920, showing an acceptable model fit.

Table 5. Result of confirmatory factor analysis, reliability, and loadings.

Latent constructs	Items	Factor loadings	CCR	AVE
Co-creation	I have used my experience from previous trips in order to make this trip better.	0.751	0.700	0.527
	I predominantly arranged this trip by myself.	0.691		
	I have spent a considerable amount of time on making this trip unique.	0.734		
Involvement	I enjoy taking a hands-on approach during my tourism experience.	0.782	0.642	0.522
	I like to be informed of what goes into my travel experience.	0.657		
Skills	I feel more confident to myself after this trip.	0.809	0.791	0.620
	I think my experience is challenging and with risk.	0.771		
	I explored my potential through learning in this trip.	0.782		
Authenticity	I enjoy local ways of life that are significantly different with other places.	0.797	0.746	0.473
	I will buy the souvenirs made by local hands.	0.646		
	I was allowed to interact with local community.	0.605		
Interaction	I have directly interacted with local service providers during the organization of my trip.	0.803	0.690	0.645
	I felt confident in my ability to collaborate with local service providers.	0.803		
Sharing	I have shared my tourism experience with others during this trip.	0.814	0.890	0.631
	I will tell others about the tourism experience I have had during this trip.	0.846		
	I experienced pleasure while participating in social media.	0.717		
Satisfaction	Overall, I am very satisfied with the visit to this destination.	0.928	0.904	0.787
	The experience I gained in this trip has met my expectations.	0.844		
Spend	When I have extra money, I am likely to spend it on a tourism experience.	0.742	0.815	0.591
	I prefer to spend more time for a more involving tourism experience.	0.795		

Table 6. Factor correlation matrix (squared).

Construct	Spend	Sharing	Interaction	Authenticity	Co-creation	Skills	Involvement	Satisfaction
Spend	0.769							
Sharing	0.587***	0.794						
Interaction	0.327***	0.357***	0.803					
Authenticity	0.575***	0.520***	0.329***	0.688				
Co-creation	0.403***	0.325***	0.648***	0.200***	0.726			
Skills	0.334***	0.261***	0.389***	0.491***	0.455***	0.787		
Involvement	0.362***	0.305***	0.502***	0.333***	0.648***	0.529***	0.722	
Satisfaction	0.372***	0.516***	0.225***	0.684***	0.208***	0.407***	0.211***	0.887

Square root of average variance extracted (AVE) is shown on the diagonal of the matrix. All coefficients were statistically significant *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 7. Path analysis result.

Hypothetical construct paths	Standardized coefficients	Standard error	Critical value	Hypothesis supported
H1: Involvement → Co-creation	0.329***	0.097	3.214	Supported
H2: Skills → Co-creation	0.213**	0.060	2.699	Supported
H3: Authenticity → Co-creation	0.166	0.104	1.659	Not supported
H4: Interaction → Co-creation	0.249**	0.065	3.626	Supported
H5: Sharing → Co-creation	0.266***	0.086	6.443	Supported
H6: Co-creation → Satisfaction	0.523***	0.109	4.691	Supported
H7: Co-creation → Spend	0.654**	0.093	5.536	Supported
H8: Co-creation → Revisit	0.317**	0.145	4.472	Supported

***Coefficient is significant at $p < 0.001$ (2-tailed).
**Coefficient is significant at $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed).

With the composite reliability of the constructs (CCR) greater than 0.6 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) the convergent validity of the constructs was still deemed adequate ranging between 0.642 and 0.904. The composite reliability of the constructs was acceptable since all were greater than the average variance extracted (AVE) values (Table 6). Since the square root AVE values exceeded the square of the correlations between the constructs it can be concluded the measurement had an acceptable degree of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Structural model assessment

Each of the nine hypotheses (Figure 1) were tested using a path analysis (Table 7). The link between the active involvement of tourists on the co-creation experience in tourism was significant ($\beta = 0.329$, $p < 0.001$) as was the ability to develop skills ($\beta = 0.213$, $p < 0.001$), to be interactive with the local community ($\beta = 0.249$, $p < 0.001$) and to share experiences with others ($\beta = 0.266$, $p < 0.001$). H1, H2, H4, and H5 were therefore supported. However, there was no statistically significant relationship between the degree of authenticity and the co-creation experience ($\beta = 0.166$, $p < 0.001$). H3 was not supported. The results from the path analysis revealed that the level of co-creation experiences were affected by four hypothetical outcomes including the tourist's satisfaction with the experience ($\beta = 0.523$, $p < 0.001$), visit intensity and the desire to stay longer and spend more ($\beta = 0.654$, $p < 0.001$), as well as whether the tourist would return or not ($\beta = 0.317$, $p < 0.001$). H6, H7, and H8 were therefore supported.

Implications

As a future direction for the Old Town of Lijiang, this study postulates co-creation tourism as a possible sustainable action to develop cultural tourism due to its attractive dependence on infinite human creativity rather than vulnerable traditional and historic assets. Many tourism destinations developing and promoting cultural tourism are challenged on the presentation and preservation of historic and cultural resources such as the Old Town of Lijiang. Co-creation as a subset of creative tourism, presents the ability for tourists to have greater engagement, knowledge, and skills sharing and learning through participation with the host service providers. The visitors collectively produce an experience with the local service providers. As in this study, these can involve the numerous small business enterprises managed and owned by the Naxi ethnic tribe within the Old Town.

While there has been discussion in the literature on the merits of creative tourism and interaction between visitors and locals (Richards & Raymond, 2000), this study took a holistic approach to co-creation experience study thereby advancing the literature to identify specific antecedents and outcomes of co-creation. A theoretical model was developed and tested. It was a model that worked well, establishing a conceptual framework for the first time on co-creation tourism at an ancient town with numerous interaction possibilities. The research showed that among the five proposed antecedents, active involvement had the strongest link with the co-creation experience in Lijiang. This finding is supported in past research that demonstrated the strong association between the active involvement of tourists and co-creation experiences (Buonincontri, Marasco, et al., 2017; Mathis et al., 2016). The availability of cultural activities is important, as there is an interest to participate in these by visitors. The activities could be targeted to specific audience profiles. The respondents were mostly female, young, and traveling for leisure. The respondent sample also revealed a high level of repeat visitation to the Old Town (36.5%) and a propensity to stay for at least 3 days (43.3%). While Tan et al. (2013) suggest the possibility of tourists developing skills through creative tourism, this research on visitors to Lijiang importantly confirms that developing skills and creative potential is a stimulus to staying engaged during the co-creation experience. A noteworthy contribution to the co-creation literature is that the level of visit intensity increases the greater the extent of co-creation. As visitors play the role of co-producer, value is added to the experience with a willingness to say longer and pay more. An unintended benefit from this higher level of engagement is that visitors acquire new knowledge and skills.

In Richards and Wilson's (2006) research on the challenge of tourists tiring with their encounters of a serial reproduction of cultural sites and attractions, the researchers emphasize the need for the development of creative tourism thereby adding value to the experiences. Co-creation tourism advances this discussion by presenting the Old Town as the creative space using endogenous cultural resources that are already present. The results showed that the issue of perceived authenticity might not affect the tourist's co-creation experience. It is a significant finding, showing that the perception of tourists on whether they are experiencing Naxi culture or not could have a limited impact on visitor experience. Previous research has emphasized that having a perception of authentic experiences can provide destination competitive advantage and impact

a repeat visit (Ramkissoon, 2015; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2010). Perceived authenticity was found not to be a significant influencing factor on this research of the Old Town with the hypothesis not supported. Some visitors to the Old Town may not be knowledgeable of Naxi culture and therefore not be conscious of whether the experiences are authentic. The understanding and level of interest in authentic cultural experiences may vary between visitor profiles and would need further investigation. The preservation of Naxi ethnic culture will involve sustaining cultural habits, events, dress, and cuisine. The Old Town authorities should consider strategy on how to effectively display authentic Naxi culture and make potential visitors more aware of these components. The Old Town has experienced a significant decline from international visitors. Integrating and explaining Naxi cultural elements as part of a co-creation visitor experience within destination marketing strategy could be investigated as part of stimulating global appeal.

Practical considerations

Investigating a strategy to properly manage Lijiang's cultural assets and heritage given the rapid changes brought about by increasing tourist numbers, Li and Shao (2005) in researching the impacts of tourism on Lijiang, alluded to specific challenges to overcome. These related to a lack of awareness on the value of authenticity and how the heritage was interpreted, a lack of cultural activities within the Old Town, as well as poor town management and cooperation between stakeholders. This study shows a clear willingness by visitors to engage in authentic cultural activities. These activities would need to be investigated, presented and adequately promoted working between local artisans and local authorities such as the Heritage Conservation and Management Committee (HCMC).

The practical onsite development of co-creation will often involve a creative tourism toolkit. This document starts with the gathering of local ethnic insights for unique tangible and intangible content, identifying of creative space and engaging storytellers, cooks, actors, musicians, and local gurus, to stimulate the senses of the visitors. The ethnic content must provide visitors with the ability to develop their own creative potential (Richards et al., 2018). There is a serial reproduction of some cultural activities at Lijiang. Cultural displays in Lijiang are mostly for entertainment value rather than education, with numerous shopfronts and staged photo opportunities for visitors, far from the promoted image of an ancient quiet village with rich culture and heritage (Salerno, 2017). This study suggests that visitors would be receptive to learn new skills and interact further with locals to share experiences. As a destination management and marketing perspective, constructing a framework to engage local artisans further must also include a promotion component to better inform potential visitors by communicating the distinctiveness and authenticity of the creative activities that would attract participation.

Conclusion

The Old Town has seen significant increases in domestic tourism arrivals, while losing its global attractiveness. A creative tourism approach through co-creation experiences

developed in collaboration with the local Naxi could provide a viable action to reverse the slow erosion of Naxi culture. Co-creation tourism can act as a stimulus to the continuation of Naxi ancient customs such as 'Naxi Dongba'. Co-creation will also provide economic benefits while preserving cultural identity as tourists wishing to acquire skills and knowledge of authentic Naxi intangible culture will require instruction and product purchases.

The integration of technology has been recently advocated as an innovate means to enhance co-creation experiences (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012). The use of tablets and smartphones and social media platforms can enrich co-creation experiences and be an important mediating platform to leverage co-creation tourism. Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat have significant appeal and use by Chinese travelers and are being shown as a key communication tactic in securing destination awareness and visitation (McCartney & Pao, 2018) Western social media platforms would be required for global audiences illustrating the importance of differentiating social media use in and outside of China. This study revealed that co-creation in tourism could positively impact visitor satisfaction, visit intensity and desire to return to the location. The use of smartphones and social media, therefore, present an effective solution to reach and communicate to potential visitors to Lijiang on co-creation possibilities before, during and after the visit.

Perceived authenticity was identified in the research as possibly having limited impact to the co-creation experiences of this respondent sample. Although the respondents were not positively affected by the perceived authenticity of their experiences, the respondents would be satisfied and would return should they have co-creation experience opportunities. The importance of authenticity should be recognized though given the commercialization and homogenization of the Old Town's business environment, which includes the numerous inns, retail and souvenir outlets, bars and restaurants. As the authorities plan for the future of the Old Town, there is a greater need to filter for business that presents and promotes Naxi traditions and culture. The Dongba cultural handicrafts have great potential, for example, to be associated with innovative and quality souvenirs unique in China to the Old Town.

Ultimately the location management, marketing, and integrity of co-creation services remain with the HCMC. The Old Town of Lijiang is challenged to integrate urban conservation with tourism development, to preserve the physical legacy and traditional built environment with increasing numbers of mostly domestic tourists. This research has shown co-creation tourism with visitors engaged in the co-production of their experiences as a more sustainable way to present cultural tourism. As well as contributing to the literature on creative tourism, this study offers reference to the numerous ancient towns throughout China facing similar challenges with growing visitor numbers, while at the same time wishing to sustain local ethnic culture and traditions. With mass tourism on the increase throughout China, the numerous ancient settings such as Lijiang now receive greater numbers of visitors. Lijiang has benefited from tourism by raising living standards (Salerno, 2017). Other Chinese ancient towns will also receive the economic stimulus from mass visitation, but the decline and displacement of Naxi people from their original setting and homogenization of the few cultural tourism offerings should provide

a warning to other locations. Richards (2010) warns that the success of a few cultural attractions and mass visitation can lead to a decline in the destination with a need to move from culture tourism to creativity. This study importantly has shown a willingness for visitors to engage, learn and co-create more. The onus will, therefore, be on the location and stakeholder collaboration to develop the context of a co-creation strategy.

Future research and limitations

As an initial investigation of the possible use of co-creation at Lijiang, this research developed a theoretical model of possible co-creation experiences outcomes from the tourist's viewpoint. However, actual behavior is not studied and therefore a future follow-up study could investigate actual behavior when presented with co-creation opportunities by the Naxi community. These two measurements of visitor intent compared to actual behavior could be compared affirming the level of the visitor's commitment to adopt co-creation experiences. A cultural intervention such as visitors preparing Naxi food or drawing Naxi Dongba could be included as part of the measurement.

Other stakeholders will also play an influencing role in the co-creation process such as the Naxi service providers and destination managers. Little is known of the level of collaboration between the local authorities and various private sector stakeholders. The study could be expanded to include a wider analysis of the stakeholder dynamics within the co-creation process and over a longer period of time. Future research should investigate the use of technology and social media platforms in developing co-creation strategy in the Old Town, engaging both visitor and host communities within this. There could be multiple uses for these platforms including educating, marketing and the sharing of experiences.

The fieldwork was conducted at the Old Town of Lijiang. With more ancient towns in China attracting increasing numbers of tourists, the theoretical framework and co-creation investigation could similarly be replicated to determine the antecedents and outcomes of co-creation experiences specific to these locations both from a visitor intention perspective as well as actual behavior.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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