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Topic of Research: *Co-creation in Tourism Mediated by Tour Operators*

Findings

Research Background: The tourism industry has grown increasingly competitive, offering travelers diverse products and services. However, customer satisfaction remains low despite this expansion. Modern travelers are more informed and engaged, requiring tour operators to adapt to evolving preferences. Co-creation is where tourists actively participate in designing their experiences—has emerged as a strategy to enhance satisfaction. This collaborative approach allows travelers to shape their journeys rather than passively consume pre-packaged services. While co-creation is gaining traction, its implementation, particularly in India's tourism sector, requires deeper exploration, especially concerning technology's role in facilitating such interactions.

Problem Statement: While co-creation in tourism is known to offer significant benefits, this study attempts to understand how its impact can be effectively enhanced, managed, and assessed. The researcher recognizes that existing studies often fail to fully explore the depth of tourist involvement and the critical role of tour operators in balancing personalized experiences with logistical challenges. Furthermore, this work seeks to address key research gaps, particularly in understanding the foundational dynamics of co-creation and how digital tools can optimize its application. By investigating these aspects, the researcher aims to contribute to the development of adaptable co-creation models that improve both tourist satisfaction and business performance.

Need for the Study: This study is essential to bridge the knowledge gap in co-creation dynamics between tourists and tour operators. By investigating how active tourist participation influences experience quality and how operators facilitate this process, the research provides actionable insights for industry stakeholders. Additionally, it

explores the role of technology in enabling co-creation, offering strategic recommendations for policymakers and businesses to enhance service delivery and operational efficiency.

Research question: The central research question for this study is: How is a tourist's experience augmented (or diminished) during a tour when he/she is allowed an opportunity to co-create his/her experience?

Objective of the study: With the existing gap in the literature, the main objective of the research is to explore the process of co-creation in tourism. The objective is to investigate the roles of tourists and tour operators in the process of co-creation. Also, the impact of co-creation is assessed on the experiences of the tourists.

Methodology: The study is exploratory in nature, hence, adopts a qualitative research method with phenomenological approach to focus on the lived experiences of tourists and tour operators in co-creating travel experiences. Among the different qualitative research approaches available, phenomenology is one of the most well-known, as it is focused on the study of experience. This method allows to in-depth exploration of subjective perceptions, interactions, and meaning-making processes. Data is collected through qualitative techniques, including interviews and thematic analysis (TA), to identify key patterns in co-creation dynamics. The data collection was conducted in two distinct phases: the first phase spanned from February to May 2023, while the second phase was carried out between August to October 2023. This two-phase design ensured a more comprehensive representation of tourists' experiences and tour operators' perspectives across different seasons. The sample consists of 18 tourists and 14 tour operators.

Findings: The study underscores the shift from passive tourism consumption to active co-creation, highlighting its dual benefits for tourists and businesses. By leveraging collaborative engagement, supported by technology and responsive operators, the industry can deliver more meaningful and personalized travel experiences. These findings reinforce co-creation's growing importance in tourism, offering a framework for stakeholders to adapt to modern traveler demands effectively. The overall contribution of co-creation to tourist experiences is significant, leading to enhanced satisfaction, loyalty, and value perception.