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Developing the Role of Intermediaries in the Creative Tourism Value Chain Case Study: A Cultural Travel to the West Europe

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Abstract

Tourist development today, coupled with advancements in information and communication technology, has rendered the traditional tourism value chain inefficient. Certain segments of the chain lack functionality or exhibit very weak functionality, failing to create added value. Among these segments are distribution channels (intermediaries), often comprising tour guides and travel agencies. Today's tourists, within the paradigm of creative tourism, seek more than mere leisure; they aim to discover the unknown and gain unique experiences through interaction with the destination and local people. In this study, conducted using qualitative and ethnographic methods, involving deep interviews and participatory observation by the researcher during a trip to Western Europe organized by the MANZAR Society in 2015, a creative and research-oriented journey was undertaken. The author endeavors to identify the role of intermediaries (tour leaders) in this journey as a theoretical framework within a dynamic and creative unified system. This framework suggests that the role of tour leaders has evolved from its traditional state to encompass a system involving activities before, during, and after the journey. The details of each activity were identified and elucidated in this study. It is worth noting that this framework was validated through a two-stage Delphi method involving experts.

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Introduction

Today, tourists have become more Developed and educated, seeking new knowledge and meaning in their lives, and they prioritize authenticity in their personal experiences (UNESCO, 2006). In other words, they are not merely passive consumers of leisure activities but rather aim to enrich their leisure time with creative experiences (Singh, 2004). This interactive experience coupled with participatory learning in tourism is recognized as creative tourism (Bastenegar, 2017; Remoaldo et al., 2020)

The economic trajectory of human societies has also followed such a path, where after agricultural, goods, and service-based economies, we are now in the era of the experience economy. In the experience economy, customers not only purchase goods or services but also acquire unique experiences, in which they themselves are involved in the creation process. (Pine & Gilmore, 2013).

In this experience-based economic paradigm and with the advent of sophisticated tourists, the tourism industry has undergone fundamental transformations. Like any other industry, it has a value chain comprising goods and service producers, their distributors, and consumers, or tourists. (Berne-Manero et al., 2018). Nowadays, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the Internet have brought about profound changes throughout this chain, including airlines, hospitality, tour operators, travel agencies, and travel destinations, significantly impacting the tourism industry. The domain of e-tourism, which refers to the use of e-business in travel and tourism, is expanding and encompassing most of the global distribution system operations and destination management. ICT tools have led to changes in the tourism sector and the creation of new strategic and managerial mechanisms in this industry. Among the most significant applications of ICT in companies is the strengthening of horizontal and vertical integration and the reduction of economies of scale in small and medium-sized tourism enterprises. This technology has greatly diminished the role of intermediaries and distribution channels in the tourism industry, enabling tourists to obtain the required services directly from service and product manufacturers with less time and at reasonable prices (HSU et al., 2008). Online tourism channels have reduced the distance between service providers and consumers, leading to increased consumer participation and collaboration in the distribution process. (Berne-Manero et al., 2018).

In such an ecosystem where technology and creativity are mixed, it is necessary to redefine and improve the tour leaders who play the role of intermediaries between producers and consumers in the tourism industry. Because today, tourists no longer want basic information from tour guides and they have access to this information easily and online, instead, they are striving for collaborative learning and authentic experiences. (Kouchaki Motlagh et al., 2023). To achieve such a goal, it seems necessary for the mediators to re-examine their role and help to reassess the places and spaces by creating mechanisms as well as discovering and understanding the hidden secrets that have been created in the interaction of humans with the environment during history.

In this study, the researcher has attempted to answer the question of how tour leaders (intermediaries) can play a role in creative tourism by exploratory and participatory observation. The Case study of this research was a 17-day trip from Iran to Western Europe (visiting 10 cities in two countries, France and Italy).

Research method

This is a qualitative research study of an ethnographic nature. In this approach, the researcher immerses themselves in the real-life experiences of people and observes what is happening, collecting data through observation (both seeing and hearing). In this type of research, due to the non-interventionist approach, the validity and credibility of the research are maintained, and contact with the research environment continues until the data becomes repetitive and does not add anything new to the researcher's knowledge (O'reilly, 2012).

Additionally, in this research, a two-step Delphi technique has been employed. The Delphi method, often used in futures research, is primarily used to discover innovative and reliable ideas. The basis of the Delphi technique is that the opinions of experts in each scientific field are the most reliable in predicting the future, and in areas of non-precise sciences where scientific laws have not yet developed, reliance on the opinions of authorized experts is justified (Ludwig & Starr, 2005).

Therefore, in this study, the researcher, through participation in a 17-day research and creative journey, has collected all their observations regarding the role of tour leaders (intermediaries) as primary data. These data were categorized. Experts then evaluated the results in two stages.

In the first stage, separate and in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 experts in the field of tourism studies, and primary indicators (pre-travel, during travel, and post-travel activities) were discussed with them, asking them to suggest any indicators for removal or addition if they deem necessary. Then, in the second stage, the modified indicators were sent to them for final approval.

Creative tourism

Although travel has always been a response to the need for curiosity, scientific exploration, and discovery of the unknown during leisure time (Mansouri, 2015), today, "creative tourism," which combines tourism with learning (Babaei Hemmati, 2014), has opened new horizons in this industry.

From one perspective, the increasing interest in intangible heritage considers creative tourism as a new manifestation of cultural tourism that meets higher levels of human needs, with its main focus on developing active skills (Richards & Wilson, 2006). However, from another perspective, the move towards creativity in tourism is seen as part of a transformation in the tourism experience (see Figure 1). In the second view, the tourist transitions from a passive consumer to a creative individual. In creative

tourism, visitors, service providers, and the local community engage in exchanging ideas and skills and influencing each other through collaboration (Korez-Vide, 2013). This alternative description of creative tourism not only represents one of the types and forms of tourism but also introduces it as a new generation and a new paradigm in tourism.

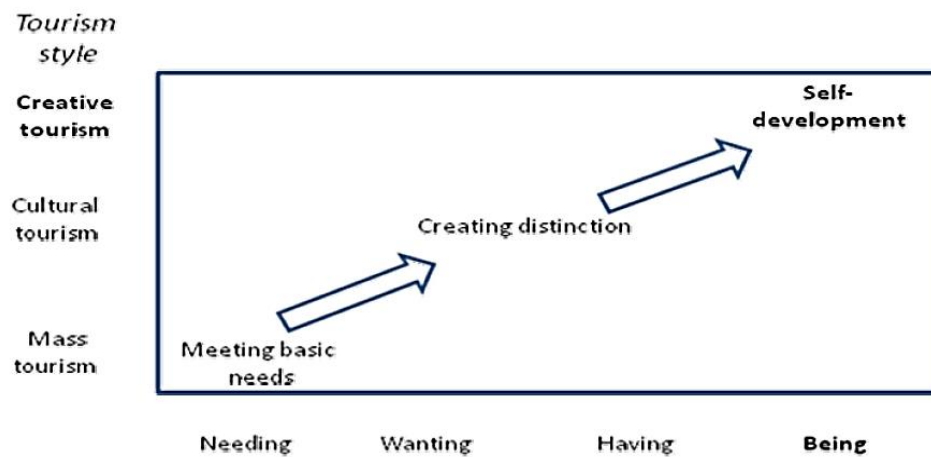


Figure 1. Evolution of tourism drivers over time (Richards & Wilson, 2007)

In studies conducted on creative tourism, we encounter two approaches: supply-oriented or hardware-based approach and demand-oriented or software-based approach (Figure 2). In the first approach, the focus is on the intelligent development of creative spaces and infrastructural structures, while in the second approach, the focus is on creatively engaging with existing spaces and developing experiences. Individuals who interpret and innovate new skills as visitors become dynamic tourists because they are capable of interpreting anything they observe. This statement implies that tourists themselves are active stakeholders, and without their active participation, the creative experience does not take shape. These tourists are themselves the creators of the tour. Interestingly, according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, creative tourism is positioned at the top of the pyramid and belongs to an elite class that has a tendency for self-actualization (Jarábková & Hamada, 2013).

Research results indicate that different tourist groups with their diverse backgrounds are creators of creative experiences, and creativity is produced through interaction with guides and mentors, activities, and the production environment, and there is a strong correlation between these factors and individuals (Tan et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Figure 2 shows that according to the P4 creativity model (Product, Process, People, and Place), with increasing interaction, the process of creativity shifts from product to process, people, and place.

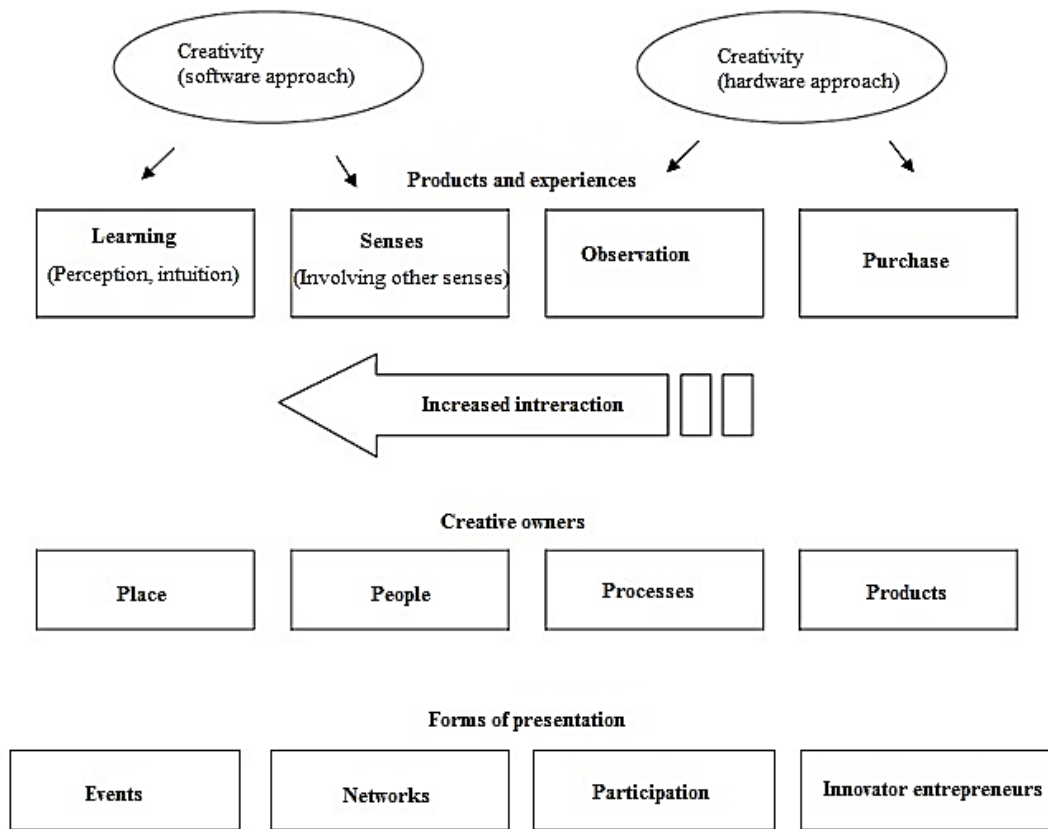


Figure 2. Creative Tourism (integration of two following sources and the author's view)
(Richards & Marques, 2012; Jarábková & Hamada, 2013)

The factors in the creative tourism value chain are Creators of creativity, artists, designers, agents, commercial goods producers, organizations, and networks of creative production, museum curators, international architects, artists, guides, government officials, financial supporters, charities, and even university students (Evans & Foord, 2004).

Scholars believe that to generate new creative experiences in tourism, one or more of the following methods can be utilized:

- ✓ New domains (utilizing various senses)
- ✓ New experiences (transformations)
- ✓ New strategies (location, routing, staging)
- ✓ Review of old strategies (new methods of observing old products and processes) (Cloke, 2005)

Studies indicate that experience-based and creative travel experiences are experiencing exponential growth worldwide, as they involve greater engagement and more learning opportunities for tourists. Evidence suggests that creative tourism plays a significant role in promoting sustainable tourism (Moleiro & Ribeiro, 2023).

Intermediaries in the tourism value chain (past, present)

Tourism involves diverse activities with various actors, locations, and roles involved. Therefore, for tourism planning and development, it is essential to identify value-added activities that shape the tourism value chain. Designing this value chain is significantly diverse and challenging (Sutomo et al., 2023).

As seen in Figure 4, distribution channels in the tourism industry include tour operators and travel agencies. These intermediaries connect service providers and tourism product suppliers to consumers (tourists) (Gabunia et al., 2011)

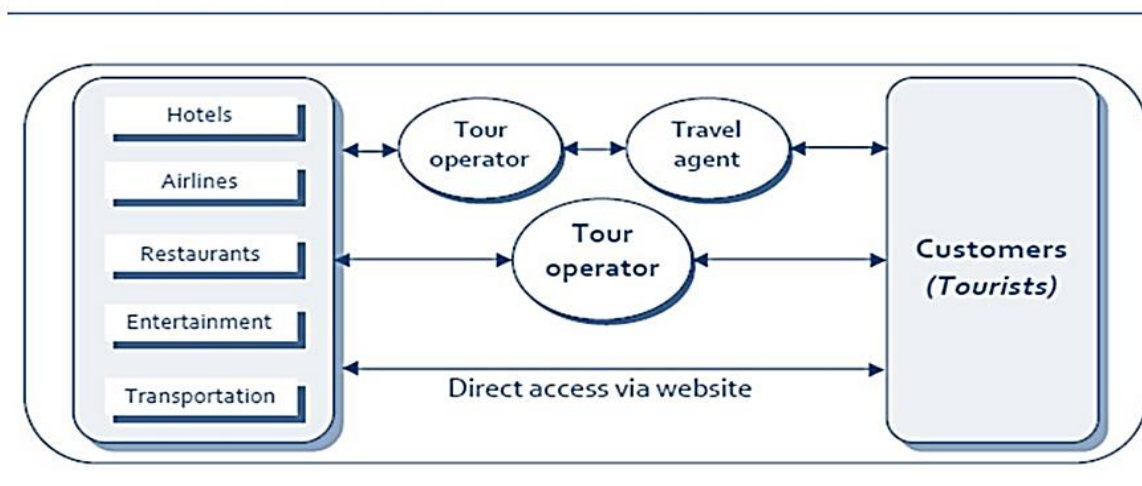


Figure 3. Intermediaries in tourism value chain (Johnston & Clark, 2008)

According to the model by Bloch and Segev (Figure 4), these intermediaries are removed from the tourism supply chain (TSC) to reduce costs and increase the responsiveness of TSC.

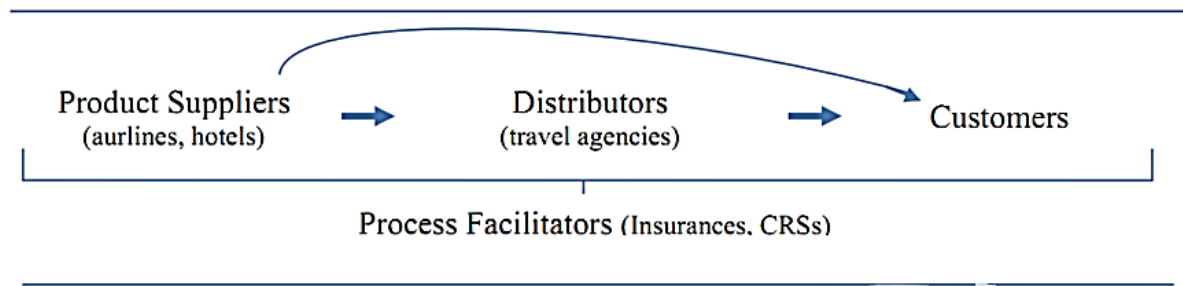


Figure 4. Tourism supply chain (Bloch & Segev, 1997)

Research indicates that in the past, local travel agencies covered their customers within their geographic area and acted as intermediaries to perform all necessary operations for a client. However, today, as internet technology becomes increasingly cost-effective and accessible, tourism industry suppliers are establishing direct contact and communication with customers, consequently reducing costs and, consequently, their prices. Moreover, tourism companies can create more attractive images with this technology and attract more customers to their services. With the Internet, travel companies can better understand their customers' preferences and continuously improve their services by obtaining constant feedback through their websites and customer profiles. The Internet is a good online guide for tourism. Online tourism not only provides benefits such as informing users about tourism capacities but also provides good executive facilities such as online hotel and accommodation reservations, as well as flight and train ticket reservations. This allows customers to directly purchase their tickets by eliminating intermediaries (HSU et al., 2008).

Today, there's not even a need to search for the opinions of professionals who have visited a place, as specific information and professional opinions are automatically updated. Moreover, internet security is on the rise (Gabunia et al., 2011).

In today's world, researchers are seeking to identify loopholes and flaws in the affected areas of the value chain in the tourism value chain to determine which sectors or activities add value and which ones lack added value. It appears that establishing a flexible value chain for the tourism industry is still in its early stages. (Tasnim et al., 2023).

Case Study: Activities of the MANZAR Research Travel Society, Trip to Western Europe

The MANZAR Research Travel Society has provided insightful and comprehensive insights into the environment and history to travelers by organizing dozens of domestic trips and several long-term trips abroad¹. These efforts have been the product of the contributions of over two hundred enthusiasts

1. Europe, China, Central Asia and Indian subcontinent, and the Caucasus

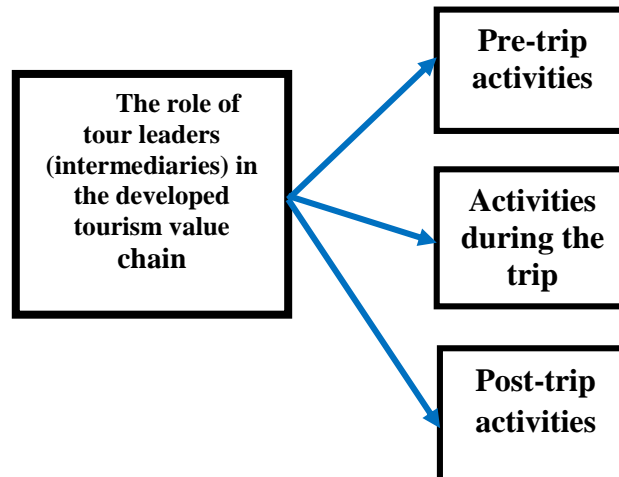
at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, offering a depth of understanding that is often hard to come by in most universities, where only theoretical knowledge is imparted.

Furthermore, the role of this society as an intermediary and channel for tourism distribution in trips to France and Italy, within a unified, dynamic, and creative system, is elaborated upon in accordance with the stated research methodology and within the framework of theoretical research. As mentioned, this system has also obtained the validation of experts through the Delphi method.

Theoretical framework of the research

As depicted in Figure 5, the theoretical framework of the research indicates that the unified and creative system of intermediaries (tour leaders) in creative and developed tourism can be divided into three interconnected sections: pre-travel activities, during-travel activities, and post-travel activities.

Figure 5. The theoretical framework of the research



Research findings

We know that creative tourism is a good platform for discovery-based learning in which the teacher and tour guide lead the tourist to explore, interpret, and discover natural, public, cultural, urban, and heritage landscapes; and travel is the best way of training and interpreting the landscape and human experience in the history and nature. New meanings are made for old and routine phenomena by breaking the normal relationship with those phenomena, and travel creates this marvel. The creative tourist reaches deeper levels of learning with enthusiasm and excitement by creative experiences which he obtains in a space that changes his previous mentalities.

The Western Europe trip of the Manzar Society in 2015 provided an opportunity for introspection, both in oneself and in others, whether they were acquaintances or strangers, spaces, and places; and offered a fresh perspective for a new gaze. This creative knowledge-oriented tourism was along with

vitality due to travel and normal mood change although it aimed at developing the insight and promoting the tourist's understanding of predecessors and current people's experiences as well as nature. The travel observation and in-depth interviews with educated fellow travelers confirmed this issue and this trip included numerous indicators of creative tourism.

This research elucidates that in this new paradigm of tourism, the role of intermediaries is elevated to such an extent that essentially, without their presence, creative tourism cannot be realized or scarcely achieves its objectives. In this study, the intermediary system in creative tourism was designed and validated. This system encompasses pre-, during, and Post-trip activities, as follows:

Pre-trip activities

- Selection of fellow travelers by travel committee in terms of gender proportion (equal numbers of males and females) and intellectual and educational degree proportion because the fellow traveler is more important than the destination and he plays an important role in shaping the creative experiences. In other words, people will have different experiences and teachings in visiting the same destinations but with different companions.
- Determining the destination cities and conducting the studies on cities by tourists and giving them to fellow travelers by library studies and internet facilities
- Implementation of a three-day training trip in *Shirgah* city of Mazandaran and basic familiarity with fellow travelers and personal and public privacy.
- Performing the administrative activities for issuing visas, tickets, insurance policies, ICOMOS cards, and necessary coordination.
- Determining the executive, financial, cultural, research, arbitration, and relevant committees' responsibilities

Activities during the trip

- Travel documentation (photos, videos, collection of travel companions' texts and manuscripts, and online publication in travel journal).
- Cultural committee activities (holding open discussion meetings in dead times between cities on the bus, holding birthday celebrations).
- Imposing discipline and special provisions for efficient use of time and respecting companions' collective interest (establishment of fines and arbitration committee).
- Executive actions distributed among fellow travelers (procurement of raw materials, cooking rice in 6-cup rice cookers distributing food, cleaning buses, responsibility of rooms, financial responsibility, etc.).

- Creating conditions for field observations, intuition, and creative experiences.
- Helping to create a collective experience of life while respecting the privacy and rights of others through discipline and accountability.
- Scientific description and analysis and practical programs during a visit to determine the question of research and discover the research hypothesis.

This learning process not only leads to an increase in knowledge but also results in behavioral changes and enhancements in skills and perspectives. The following points illustrate the creative and developed role of tour leaders in this regard:

- ✓ Having a different approach to describing places to uncover the hidden truth within those spaces and explain the "why" rather than just the "what."
- ✓ Emphasizing the importance of keen observation and grasping the meanings of spaces (a prominent example being explanations related to the historical cemetery in Milan).
- ✓ Moving within the urban fabric of life, in addition to historical contexts and tourist spots, for close interaction with the culture of the people and experiencing current life (especially through traveling by public transportation and planned and lengthy walks within the city).
- ✓ Creating a balance between silence and conversation (a prominent example is the serenity atop a hill facing the *Notre-Dame de la Garde* Cathedral in Marseille for moments, followed by watching the sunset on the beaches of the Marseille port and the Mediterranean Sea).

Post-trip activities

- Completing the hypothesis and field observations by library studies and providing them in the form of a research paper.
- Post-trip meetings to continue the friendship and purposeful control of travel research products.
- Travel criticism meetings to organize perfect trips in the future.
- Finalization of travel products by publishing research papers, scientific books, and movies.

Discussion and conclusion

New understanding is not achieved only by relying on books and the Internet in today's world, it needs contemplation that is the result of attention to phenomena and discovering their relationship that is possible only by traveling and leaving the routine life

As described earlier, creative tourists break the tourism bubble and planned accommodations and symbolic cultural facilities at the destination by a tendency to learning opportunities in routine life and thus lead to increased social and intellectual capital for themselves, their fellow travelers, and their

destination due to creating the interactive relationship in the tourist value chain (Richards & Marques, 2012).

Creative tourists, who seek more interactive experiences, can analyze destinations and interpret local space and culture. Therefore, creative tourism needs trained operators as the ones who help them to grow and create individual identities. However, the experience is creative and unique when people play roles in it in addition to its design and creation. Furthermore, the intermediaries and distribution channels of this type of tourism should have rich knowledge and upper levels of scientific and managerial expertise.

The development of the internet and information technology has brought about changes in the structure of the tourism industry and has undoubtedly been the most significant accelerant in tourism distribution systems. This has led to intermediaries and travel agents, who used to connect customers and producers, facing the threat of obsolescence and replacement as services such as electronic payments and destination recognition, and computerized reservation systems, which are among the most powerful technologies influencing the distribution system in the tourism value chain, have emerged. These advancements should be placed among the most important developments, as they enhance efficiency, agility, and timely delivery of services while reducing operational and support costs associated with distributing products and services to customers.

However, the current qualitative study indicates that not only the intermediaries are not eliminated by technology development in the creative tourism paradigm, but their traditional roles and skills have also changed. The distribution system employees previously needed important skills such as route plans and travel plans, approved schedules, tariff reform, and preparation of tickets, but these are now done by computers. Electronic tourism includes the digitization of all processes and value chain tourism, hosting and food, and all such industries. The service roles of intermediaries have been changed to their creative roles in the new paradigm. This creativity is observed in The theoretical framework of this research in the form of pre-, during, and post-trip activity systems. It can be argued that the introduced tourism intermediation system is appropriate for a creative and educated community; however, it is important to criticize the introduced model in future research to generalize to other social classes.

By observation and in-depth interviews with fellow travelers, this research concludes that the tourism of Western Europe in 2015 is creative and consistent with features of this tourism presented by Richards and Marques (2012) and also Cloke's four methods for creating creative experiences (2005). According to the Delphi technique, it is found that the scientific, research, and academic centers are undoubtedly among the successful models of intermediaries and tour operators in a new generation of tourism and they should take the responsibility of making the optimal managerial and competitive tools scientific and modern and preparing them as well as integrating the tourism with learning.

This research is also in line with the research of Kouchaki et al. (2023), which emphasizes increasing the creativity of tour guides in the tourism value chain to improve the level of satisfaction of today's tourists.

The journey came to an end with its unique features, encompassing the pre-, during, and Post-trip activities, from cooking meals to unpacking lunches from backpacks and quickly consuming them to visiting places and receiving expert explanations to engaging in free discussions and producing articles and research products after the journey. undoubtedly, each of my fellow travelers has found a better path for continuing their lives with new intellectual and social capital and meaningful communication development. The creative travel experiences they have contributed to illuminate this path. This journey exemplifies tourism as a system for wisdom (Mansouri, 2015), aimed at achieving human growth and perfection.

One of the significant limitations of this study has been its confinement to a single case study to delineate activities related to the research theoretical framework. Other researchers can expand upon the details of this framework for other creative tourism packages.

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