

Designing and Managing Tourism Programs to Create Memorable Tourist Experiences: Insights from Thailand

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Abstract

In today's dynamic tourism landscape, travelers increasingly seek experiences that are meaningful, immersive, and more enriching than traditional sightseeing. This shift challenges tourism programs to move beyond conventional methods and concentrate on creating memorable, engaging, and culturally authentic experiences. This study examines how tourism programs in Thailand can be strategically designed and effectively managed to enhance experiential value, with particular emphasis on cultural authenticity, emotional engagement, participatory co-creation, and innovative practices.

Using a qualitative methodology, the study employed semi-structured interviews with tourists, local guides, and program managers, complemented by participant observation within community-based tourism initiatives. The results reveal that active tourist participation in co-creation, engagement in authentic cultural activities, and the use of digital storytelling tools—such as mobile applications and virtual reality—substantially enhance both satisfaction and memorability. Moreover, integrating sustainable practices, including environmentally responsible activities and community reinvestment, strengthens ethical value and supports long-term tourism development. The policy implications highlight the need to invest in local capacity building, promote co-creative platforms, and expand digital infrastructure to enable innovative and immersive experiences. Overall, this study offers a comprehensive framework and practical recommendations for tourism program designers, managers, and policymakers seeking to advance sustainable, culturally enriched, and emotionally impactful tourism experiences in Thailand.

Keywords: experience co-creation, cultural authenticity, digital storytelling, sustainable tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism in the 21st century has shifted from passive sightseeing to the pursuit of meaningful, immersive, and memorable experiences. Travelers now seek opportunities to engage deeply with local cultures, participate in authentic activities, and create personal narratives that extend beyond the destination itself. This evolution has prompted tourism managers to rethink program design and management, emphasizing experience-driven strategies that combine cultural authenticity, emotional engagement, participatory co-creation, and innovative technologies.

In Thailand, with its rich cultural heritage, diverse communities, and growing community-based tourism sector, there is significant potential to develop programs that deliver highly engaging and

memorable experiences. The integration of innovative tools, such as digital storytelling, augmented reality, and mobile-based immersive applications, alongside traditional cultural activities, allows tourism programs to meet the evolving expectations of modern travelers. This study investigates how tourism programs in Thailand can be designed and managed to maximize experiential value, focusing on practical strategies that enhance tourist satisfaction, emotional engagement, and cultural learning, while also supporting sustainable tourism development.

2. Literature Review

The concept of memorable tourist experiences (MTEs) emphasizes that enduring travel experiences are shaped through emotional, cognitive, and social engagement (Hosany, Prayag, & Edgar, 2022). Prior research indicates that experiences involving active participation, multi-sensory stimulation, and meaningful cultural learning are more likely to be memorable and impactful for travelers. Co-creation theory further underscores the importance of tourist involvement in crafting their own experiences, whereby tourists and local stakeholders collaboratively generate value. Deng (2024) found that tourists who actively engage in co-creation report higher satisfaction, deeper emotional attachment, and an increased likelihood of revisiting or recommending the destination.

In Thailand, emerging studies highlight the benefits of integrating authentic cultural engagement with innovative technological tools. Treesuwan (2025) demonstrated that the combination of service innovation and participatory activities in the tourism and hospitality sector enhances customer loyalty and elevates the perceived value of the experience. Similarly, Srivirach, Narakorn, and Seesupan (2024) found that authentic cultural encounters—such as participation in local crafts, rituals, and storytelling—strengthen place attachment and contribute to long-term tourist satisfaction. Furthermore, digital tools, including mobile storytelling platforms and augmented or virtual reality applications, have been shown to create immersive narrative environments that enhance learning, reflection, and emotional engagement (Rujirakul & Krompho, 2023; Jattamart et al., 2023).

Sustainability also plays a pivotal role in shaping memorable tourism experiences. Practices that encourage environmental responsibility, community reinvestment, and ethical interaction not only support the long-term resilience of tourism programs but also enrich tourists' perceived value and sense of social responsibility (Liang et al., 2022). Collectively, these findings suggest that the integration of cultural authenticity, co-creation, technological innovation, and sustainable practices provides a comprehensive framework for designing impactful and meaningful tourist experiences in Thailand.

3. Research Objectives

This study aims to explore how tourism programs in Thailand can be strategically designed and effectively managed to deliver memorable, culturally authentic, and emotionally engaging experiences. Specifically, the research seeks to identify the key factors that enhance tourist satisfaction, assess the role of co-creation and participatory engagement in program design, evaluate the integration of digital and immersive technologies, and examine how sustainable practices contribute to both ethical value and long-term program viability. By synthesizing these

elements, the study aims to provide practical recommendations for tourism managers, local communities, and policymakers to develop programs that are innovative, culturally enriching, and socially responsible (Treesuwan, 2025; Srivirach, Narakorn, & Seesupan, 2024; Rujirakul & Krompho, 2023).

4. Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative multiple-case study approach to gain in-depth insights into tourism program design and management in Thailand. Data collection methods included:

- Semi-structured interviews with tourists, local guides, and program managers to capture personal experiences, perceptions, and engagement patterns in tourism programs.
- Participant observation during community-based tourism activities, including craft workshops, cultural rituals, storytelling sessions, and immersive heritage experiences, allowing researchers to witness co-creation processes, emotional engagement, and interactions firsthand.
- Document analysis of program plans, marketing materials, digital content, and post-visit feedback to examine design strategies, operational practices, and tourist responses.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights related to cultural authenticity, co-creation, emotional engagement, technological innovation, sustainability, and barriers to program implementation. This methodology enabled a comprehensive understanding of how tourism programs can create memorable experiences and inform strategic program development (Deng, 2024; Jattamart et al., 2023).

5. Research Findings

The findings reveal several important insights into the factors that shape meaningful and memorable tourism experiences.

1. **Cultural Authenticity** – Engaging tourists in authentic activities, such as traditional crafts, cooking classes, local ceremonies, and storytelling, significantly enhances satisfaction and memorability. Tourists reported that hands-on experiences and meaningful cultural interactions contributed to stronger emotional connections and a sense of personal enrichment (Srivirach, Narakorn, & Seesupan, 2024).
2. **Co-creation and Participatory Engagement** – Allowing tourists to influence itineraries, select activities, and actively participate in program planning fosters a sense of ownership and increases engagement. Local stakeholders benefit from empowerment and increased motivation to sustain the programs, creating a mutually beneficial dynamic (Deng, 2024).
3. **Technological Integration** – Digital tools, such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and mobile storytelling applications, enhance immersive experiences and support learning. These technologies enable tourists to engage with cultural narratives interactively, reflect on their experiences, and deepen emotional resonance (Rujirakul & Krompho, 2023; Jattamart et al., 2023).

4. **Sustainable Practices** – Incorporating environmentally responsible activities, waste reduction strategies, and community reinvestment strengthens both ethical and experiential value. Tourists appreciate programs that balance enjoyment with social and environmental responsibility, reinforcing long-term loyalty and support for the destination (Liang et al., 2022; Treesuwan, 2025).

Despite these strengths, several challenges remain. Local stakeholders often face limitations in adopting advanced technologies, scaling personalized experiential programs can be difficult, and ensuring cultural authenticity while managing increasing tourist demand continues to pose ongoing concerns.

6. Result

The study underscores that creating memorable tourism experiences requires a holistic, integrated approach. Policy and management implications include:

- **Capacity Building** – Providing training and skill development for local guides and community members ensures they can deliver authentic, engaging, and technologically enhanced experiences.
- **Co-creative Platforms** – Establishing structured mechanisms for tourist participation, such as collaborative workshops and interactive program design sessions, institutionalizes co-creation and enhances visitor satisfaction.
- **Digital Infrastructure Investment** – Developing robust digital tools, applications, and immersive technologies supports scalable, innovative, and interactive experiences while maintaining cultural authenticity.
- **Sustainable Program Design** – Policies should encourage environmentally responsible practices and community reinvestment to promote ethical tourism and long-term viability. Programs that balance economic, cultural, and ecological considerations deliver more meaningful and memorable experiences.

Continuous monitoring, feedback, and adaptive program design are essential to maintaining program quality and ensuring that experiences remain engaging and relevant over time.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that creating memorable and meaningful tourist experiences in Thailand requires an integrated approach that combines cultural authenticity, participatory co-creation, emotional engagement, technological innovation, and sustainable practices. Authentic cultural interactions, such as engaging in local crafts, rituals, and storytelling, remain central to tourists' sense of connection and satisfaction. Co-creation enables tourists to actively shape their experiences, fostering ownership, engagement, and long-term loyalty. Digital tools, including virtual reality and mobile storytelling applications, enhance immersion and support reflective learning, making experiences more interactive and memorable.

Sustainable practices, such as eco-friendly activities and community reinvestment, reinforce ethical value while promoting long-term program viability. Policy and management strategies

should prioritize capacity building for local stakeholders, investment in co-creative platforms, and robust digital infrastructure, ensuring programs are scalable, culturally respectful, and socially responsible.

By integrating these elements, tourism program designers and managers can develop initiatives that not only satisfy contemporary travelers' expectations but also contribute positively to local communities and the environment. Future research could explore longitudinal impacts of immersive and co-created tourism experiences, as well as the potential for integrating emerging technologies, such as AI and interactive simulations, to further enhance engagement and memorability.

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