

The Economic Content of Immersive Experiences in Ethnocultural Tourism: A Value Co-Creation Model

Kasimova Yulduz Bakhtiyorovna¹

¹ Independent researcher, "Silk Road" International university of tourism and cultural

ARTICLE INFO

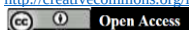
Keywords:

immersive experience;
ethnocultural tourism;
Samarkand Region;
organizational and economic
mechanism; local value; value
co-creation

Vol. 01, No.03, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CCBY4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



ABSTRACT

To define the economic content of immersive ethnocultural tourism experiences and systematize the channels through which they create value for tourists, local participants, and the destination. The study applies a systematic literature review, comparative conceptual analysis, and value-chain synthesis using official statistics, institutional sources, and peer-reviewed research. Immersiveness is conceptualized not as a technology in itself but as the tourist's active role in a cultural process. The analysis distinguishes tourist value, firm revenue, and locally retained value, and identifies authenticity, heritage protection, local consent, and transparent payment flows as non-substitutable conditions. The digital and institutional mechanisms proposed in the article are ex ante designs. They should not be interpreted as proven economic effects until validated with pilot transaction data, visitor surveys, and independent evaluation.

Introduction

Competitive advantage in tourism is determined less by the number of available resources than by the capacity to convert those resources into meaningful experiences for tourists, equitable income for local actors, and value retained within the destination. Experience-economy and value-co-creation approaches regard tourists not as passive recipients of a completed service but as participants who help shape the outcome [1-4]. Accordingly, this article aims to define the economic content of immersive ethnocultural tourism experiences and systematize the channels through which they create value for tourists, local participants, and the destination.

The research problem is not simply that immersiveness is often equated with virtual or augmented reality or with spectacular visual effects. The central issue is how rights, scenario design, operations, cost, payment, local interests, and outcome evaluation are connected within a single product cycle. Samarkand's UNESCO status and living ethnocultural resources create economic opportunities while simultaneously imposing constraints related to heritage safety and authenticity [7; 12].

Pine and Gilmore conceptualized experience as a value proposition distinct from goods and services [1]. Vargo and Lusch showed that, within service-dominant logic, value emerges in use [2], while Prahalad and Ramaswamy interpreted co-creation as an interactive process between consumers and organizations [3]. Tourism research connects these ideas to memorable experiences, authenticity, local participation, and destination sustainability [4-8].

To translate a general theoretical model into a regional management decision, however, the unit of measurement must be explicit. Visitor arrivals, persons accommodated, tours sold, and product transactions are not equivalent indicators. The present study therefore retains the principles of data auditing and product-level evidence used in the underlying research [9-11].

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research design combines a systematic literature review, comparative differentiation of concepts, and value-chain synthesis. The evidence base comprises the relevant theoretical and empirical materials from the underlying research, official statistics for Uzbekistan and Samarkand Region, UNESCO and OECD materials, and peer-reviewed academic literature. Indicators with incompatible definitions or coverage were not mechanically combined into a single time series.

Three levels of evidence were distinguished: (1) facts confirmed by an official or academic source; (2) analytical inferences derived from available evidence; and (3) authorial proposals that require pilot testing. Because raw data from a primary survey or pilot intervention were unavailable, no regression coefficients, p-values, net present value estimates, or percentage impacts were fabricated.

3. RESULTS

The concept of a tourism experience has developed at the intersection of economics, marketing, sociology, and psychology. Consequently, the literature does not provide a single definition applicable to all contexts. In services marketing, an experience is a subjective outcome formed during consumption; in the experience economy, it is treated as a distinct value proposition. Service-dominant logic further holds that a firm does not deliver finished value but offers a value proposition, while final value emerges through the integration of resources by consumers and other actors.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy described value co-creation as a transition from a firm-centred system to one based on interaction with consumers. In tourism, this approach has been extended to an experience environment encompassing pre-trip planning, participation at the destination, and post-trip memory and communication. The literature identifies active participation, interaction, attention, and the contribution of tourists' personal resources as core features of co-creation.

The term immersion is used in tourism in two senses. First, it denotes intensive involvement in an event, environment, or cultural process. Second, it refers to changes in the boundary between physical and digital environments through virtual, augmented, and mixed reality. Systematic research on immersive tourism technologies indicates that they can be applied to information provision, trip planning, site interpretation, and virtual visits. Technological immersion, however, is not equivalent to experiential immersion. Making paper with an artisan, preparing local food jointly, or acting within a historical role can generate deep involvement without digital technology.

From this perspective, an immersive ethnocultural tourism experience encompasses three relationships simultaneously: a sensory-cognitive relationship between the tourist and the cultural environment; social cooperation between the tourist and local actors; and an economic relationship that converts tourist expenditure, labour, and intellectual property into territorial value. If any one of these relationships is absent, the product risks becoming merely a technological demonstration, a staged spectacle, or a conventional commercial transaction.

The principal methodological implication is that the label immersive should refer to the tourist's role in the value-creation process rather than to the presence of a virtual-reality headset or a theatrical performer. If tourists only observe prepared content, the product may be an enhanced presentation but not a co-created experience. By contrast, when tourists perform an activity under the guidance of a local expert, make decisions, personalize the outcome, and understand the meaning of the process, immersion can arise without technology.

Proposed definition. An immersive ethnocultural tourism experience is an integrated tourism product through which tourists co-create value by interacting physically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially with the destination's cultural environment, local population, and service providers, converting

that value into memories, knowledge, and emotions for tourists and into income, employment, and resources for heritage conservation within the destination.

The main economic distinction is reflected in price formation. In a conventional model, price is linked primarily to access rights or service costs. An immersive product introduces additional costs for scenario development, small-group delivery, local expert time, props, digital content, and quality control. These elements may support premium pricing, but a higher price cannot be considered empirically justified until tourists' willingness to pay has been measured.

From the destination's perspective, the advantage of an immersive product lies not only in increasing gross revenue but also in retaining value within the local chain. If booking, content, props, and most performers are sourced externally, local economic benefits may remain limited even when tourist expenditure rises. Financial assessment must therefore calculate not only gross revenue but also the share paid directly to local participants.

The transformation of the tourism value proposition can be represented as a continuum. Goods and services do not disappear; an additional layer of value is built upon them. Immersive products cannot function without basic services such as transport, safety, sanitation, and booking. Deficiencies in these services reduce the value of even the strongest scenario.

The analysis also indicates that each potential benefit has a corresponding risk. Emotional dramatization may strengthen memory but can falsify historical events; social interaction may enhance perceived authenticity but can reduce local residents to 'living exhibits.' Quality must therefore be assessed not only through tourist satisfaction but also through expert content review, local consent, and complaint records.

Authenticity is a central but complex category in immersive ethnocultural tourism. Wang distinguishes objective, constructive, and existential authenticity. Objective authenticity concerns the historical veracity of an object or practice; constructive authenticity concerns representations shaped by society and the market; and existential authenticity concerns whether tourists feel genuine and free. An immersive scenario can combine all three levels. It is therefore incorrect to equate a tourist's perception that something 'felt real' with a conclusion that it was culturally accurate.

Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick developed a scale for memorable tourism experiences that includes hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge. These dimensions may inform empirical work in Samarkand, but direct translation into Uzbek, Russian, and English is insufficient. Without translation and back-translation, pilot testing, confirmation of factor structure, reliability assessment, and measurement-invariance testing, direct comparison of scores across language groups would be methodologically weak.

To clarify the economic content of an immersive experience, tourist value, firm revenue, and territorial value must be distinguished. Tourist value is the visitor's subjective assessment of benefits such as knowledge, emotion, memory, social connection, and personal meaning. Firm revenue is the monetary payment received for the product. Territorial value concerns the portion of that payment converted into local labour, materials, taxes, rent, conservation, and capabilities. These outcomes influence one another but are not equivalent. A highly rated free event may not be financially viable for the operator, while a high-priced package may retain little local value if a large share is transferred to external platforms and imported equipment.

Under service-dominant logic, an organization creates a combination of propositions and resources that enables value to emerge during use rather than producing finished value. An immersive ethnocultural product involves more contributors than a conventional service: local knowledge holders provide content; scenario designers contribute dramaturgy; heritage institutions define rights and restrictions; operators provide logistics and sales; and tourists contribute attention, time, and creative

action. The economic unit is therefore not a single ticket but a bundle of transactions that integrates different resources at a specified time and quality. This perspective also distinguishes value creation from value capture: product sales do not demonstrate equitable distribution when the actors who created the content receive no payment.

Table 1. Official composition of tangible cultural heritage sites in Samarkand Region and consistency between sources

Resource category	Statistics Committee	Cultural Heritage Agency	Difference	Condition for an immersive product
Total tangible cultural heritage sites	1,607	1,607	0	Rights, capacity, and interpretation passport
Archaeological sites	975	973	-2	Impact and visitor-capacity assessment
Architectural monuments	562	564	+2	Low-intervention, site-appropriate scenario
Monumental-art sites	36	36	0	Interpretation without physical intervention
Places of interest	34	34	0	Defined site boundary and responsible management entity

Source: Official data from the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Cultural Heritage Agency [13; 14]. The totals agree, while the internal classifications differ by two units.

The two official sources agree on the total of 1,607 tangible cultural heritage sites but differ by two units in both the archaeological and architectural categories. Licensing and monitoring should therefore rely on a unique register identifier for each site rather than on the aggregate total alone.

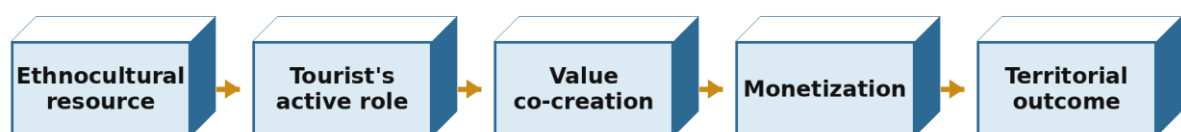


Figure 1. Three-dimensional chain of value co-creation

Source: Author's design based on the analytical framework developed in this study.

4. DISCUSSION

The cost architecture of an immersive format has four layers. The first consists of initial fixed costs for scenario development, scholarly review, design, prototyping, and digital content. The second consists of variable costs repeated during each session, including local expert labour, materials, transport, props, and cleaning. The third comprises transaction costs: identifying partners, negotiating, coordinating bookings, distributing payments, verifying quality, and resolving disputes. The fourth consists of life-cycle costs for heritage conservation, safety, insurance, data protection, and content updates. Treating only the second layer as production cost artificially depresses the price and makes the project dependent on continuing subsidies.

Mechanically allocating fixed costs across the planned number of participants can also be misleading. The capacity of an immersive product is constrained by the scenario, space, expert time, and heritage regulations. Expanding group size may reduce unit cost but weaken interaction and participation. Optimal capacity is therefore not the point of minimum cost; it is the point at which marginal revenue, experience quality, safety, and conservation constraints are jointly satisfied. At sacred or fragile sites, cultural capacity may be lower than physical capacity, and strong commercial demand does not nullify that restriction.

The word immersive does not itself justify premium pricing. Experience may constitute a distinct value proposition [1], but tourists' willingness to pay for a specific Samarkand product must be tested with primary data. A modular price may distinguish basic admission, expert time, materials, personalization, language, group size, and follow-up digital content. This structure makes the sources of cost and value transparent. At the same time, a social-access arrangement should be designed separately from the commercial package so that high prices do not restrict local residents' or young people's access to cultural resources.

Retaining value within the destination differs from maximizing total tourist expenditure. When booking commissions, software, advertising, and equipment expenditures leave the region, the local provider's share falls. Financial analysis should therefore record gross revenue together with local wages, purchases of local materials, local rent, and allocations to a conservation fund. This indicator is not a complete economic multiplier because it excludes indirect and induced effects. Its purpose is to show transparently how much of the package's direct cash flow reaches local actors.

The absence of a market price for a heritage resource does not mean that its use is costless. Throsby notes that cultural value is not fully expressed in market prices. If tourism use increases cleaning, repair, monitoring, the time required from knowledge holders, or pressure on shared spaces, the contract must specify who bears these costs. An allocation to a conservation fund should be treated as a cost of reproducing the resource rather than as charity. Otherwise, the business receives short-term revenue while the resource holder assumes long-term losses.

Leakage should be interpreted carefully. Not every external purchase is harmful: technology, design, or marketing expertise obtained outside the region may improve product quality. The issue is whether the external expenditure contributes commensurate value and develops local capacity. Recurring payments to a closed platform that separates operators from their booking data create dependency; by contrast, data-export capability, staff training, and technical documentation can turn an external purchase into knowledge transfer.

Cash-flow analysis must avoid double counting. If souvenir purchases at a workshop are excluded from gross package revenue, they may be recorded as additional expenditure; if the souvenir is already included in the package price, it must not be added again. Likewise, a payment transferred by an operator to an artisan is not new revenue for the regional economy but a distribution within the package. Defining the transaction boundary, accounting period, and cash-flow participant before empirical estimation reduces this error.

The economic performance of an immersive product should therefore be assessed in three stages: the outcome created for tourists, the financial viability of the product, and the territorial distribution of payments and external effects. A positive result at one stage cannot substitute for evidence at the other two. This distinction enables visitor surveys, transaction data, and territorial indicators to be linked within a single causal chain without being conflated.

Operationalizing immersion should not reduce a multidimensional theoretical construct to one undifferentiated immersion score. Sensory, cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social dimensions are related but operate through different mechanisms. Cognitive content may improve knowledge, social

interaction may strengthen trust and perceived authenticity, and behavioural participation may affect skills and additional purchases. Summing these scores without validated weights obscures which design element was effective. Each construct should first be assessed separately, and an aggregate index should be calculated only after the factor structure has been empirically confirmed.

The memorable tourism experience scale developed by Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick may provide a theoretical starting point. It cannot be assumed, however, that every item has identical meaning in the Samarkand context. Translation and back-translation, expert appraisal, and cognitive interviews can test linguistic adequacy; a pilot survey can evaluate factor loadings, internal consistency, and discriminant validity. Where language groups are compared, configural, metric, and scalar invariance should be tested sequentially. Otherwise, a difference in mean scores may reflect different interpretations of the questions rather than different experiences.

The timing of measurement also affects the result. An evaluation obtained immediately after a session is sensitive to novelty and performer effects; a delayed survey captures retained meaning but may increase response-selection bias. A short post-session survey should therefore be combined with an optional delayed module. Tourists should not be compelled to provide feedback or excessive personal information; identifiers should be minimized, and the purpose of data use should be disclosed in advance.

Economic indicators require a common transaction dictionary. If revenue, local payment, additional purchase, subsidy, and conservation allocation are defined differently by each operator, portfolio-level aggregation will be invalid. Locality should not be classified solely by legal address but by the actual labour and expenditure undertaken in the region by the person or enterprise receiving payment. Cash payments should also be recorded in a verifiable register; otherwise, local artisan income may remain invisible while external-platform transactions are fully captured.

Collecting an indicator without a decision rule has little practical value. An increase in complaints, for example, may indicate declining quality or simply a more accessible complaints channel. Each key performance indicator should therefore have a defined direction, threshold, context, and decision owner. When capacity is exceeded, booking slots should be reduced; when local objections concerning authenticity arise, content should be suspended and reviewed; when contribution margin is negative, price, format, or cost should be reconsidered. An explained stop/go rule is more defensible scientifically and managerially than an automatic ranking.

A change in an indicator is insufficient for causal inference. Seasonality, exchange rates, transport, major events, advertising, and general tourist flows may affect the outcome simultaneously. Before a pilot begins, the baseline period, appropriate comparison unit, and unit of analysis should be specified. Where random assignment is infeasible, quasi-experimental methods such as difference-in-differences, matching, or interrupted time-series analysis should be selected according to data quality and the number of observations. The method should reflect data limitations rather than serve to 'prove' a predetermined result.

A measurement passport can convert immersive experience from a marketing slogan into a testable scientific construct. It links the concept, indicator, data source, timing, methodological limitation, and management decision within one chain. Under this logic, tourist perceptions, business outcomes, local distribution, and heritage impacts are complementary but non-substitutable forms of evidence.

Immersive ethnocultural tourism cannot therefore be reduced to a collection of digital technologies, theatrical performances, or workshops. Its economic core lies in integrating the resources of tourists, local communities, and service providers to create memorable value for visitors and local income for the destination. Evaluation must measure authenticity, safety, local payments, and heritage impacts alongside the depth of participation.

The theoretical significance of these findings is that technological effects do not replace the economic mechanism of immersive ethnocultural tourism. Their practical significance lies in shifting decisions away from aggregate marketing indicators toward product-level evidence on rights, cost, payment, and key performance indicators. This approach is consistent with OECD principles of evidence-based destination management and UN Tourism's sustainability measurement framework [6; 8].

The study's principal limitation is the absence of product-transaction data, tourist survey data, and before-and-after pilot observations. The mechanisms and matrices proposed here must therefore be interpreted as *ex ante* designs. The next stage requires a pilot that integrates a paid-demand test, resident feedback, an incident log, and a register of local payments.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Immersiveness is not a technology but the tourist's active role in a cultural process; its outcome is the joint formation of memory, knowledge, willingness to pay, and local value.
2. Facts, analytical inferences, and project proposals must be presented as separate levels of evidence.
3. Tourist flows and gross revenue are insufficient measures of product performance; decisions require product-level data on costs, payments, and outcomes.
4. Cultural rights, heritage safety, and local participation must remain non-compensatory conditions that cannot be offset by a higher economic score.
5. The proposed approach should first be tested in a limited pilot and scaled only after independent evaluation.

REFERENCES

1. Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1999). *The Experience Economy*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
2. Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 68(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.68.1.1.24036>
3. Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(3), 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.20015>
4. Campos, A. C., Mendes, J., do Valle, P. O., & Scott, N. (2018). Co-creation of tourist experiences: A literature review. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 21(4), 369-400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2015.1081158>
5. Richards, G. (2018). Cultural tourism: A review of recent research and trends. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 36, 12-21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2018.03.005>
6. UN Tourism. (2024). *Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism*.
7. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Samarkand - Crossroad of Cultures. World Heritage List No. 603.
8. OECD. (2025). *Building Strong and Resilient Tourism Destinations*. OECD Tourism Papers, 2025/03. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a57c343d-en>
9. Callaway, B., & Sant'Anna, P. H. C. (2021). Difference-in-differences with multiple time periods. *Journal of Econometrics*, 225(2), 200-230.
10. National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2024-2025). *Tourism and Recreation in the Republic of Uzbekistan* [official statistical publication, in Uzbek].
11. Statistics Department of Samarkand Region. (2024). *Key Indicators of Tourism in Samarkand Region* [official statistical release, in Uzbek].
12. ICOMOS. (2022). *International Charter for Cultural Heritage Tourism*.



13. National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. How many tangible cultural heritage sites are there in Samarkand Region? [in Uzbek]. <https://stat.uz/uz/matbuot-markazi/qo-mitayangiliklar/48783-samarqand-viloyatida-moddiy-madaniy-meros-obyektlari-soni-qancha>
14. Cultural Heritage Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Information on tangible cultural heritage sites in Samarkand Region [in Uzbek]. <https://gov.uz/oz/madaniymeros/news/view/12124>
15. Unified Register of Digital Government Information Systems. Tourism Information System, ID 2230. <https://reestr.uz/ru/projects/2230?type=passport>
16. UZINFOCOM. Single National Tourism Platform. <https://uzinfocom.uz/en/projects/single-national-tourism-platform-en-11>