

Optimizing the Consumer Experience in the Tourism Industry: An Analysis of the "Paying for Emotional Value" Phenomenon

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Abstract

As the tourism industry becomes a new growth point for the economy, a notable shift in consumer behavior has emerged: the willingness to "pay for emotional value." This phenomenon is reshaping the consumer market, product supply, and competitive landscape. In an era dominated by the attention economy, tourism providers that innovate to deliver high-quality products coupled with positive emotional experiences can achieve significant growth. This paper, grounded in the theory of emotional value, investigates the current state of the tourism industry and explores the "emotional value demands" of modern tourists. It analyzes the pathways to fulfilling these demands and proposes optimization strategies. The objective is to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the high-quality development of the tourism industry by focusing on how to systematically integrate emotional value into tourism products and services, thereby enhancing consumer pleasure and satisfaction.

Keywords: emotional value, tourism industry, consumer experience, emotional resonance

1. Introduction

The year 2023 was designated the "Year of Consumption Promotion" in China, marking a period of comprehensive recovery and warming in the consumer market. This resurgence has been characterized by the emergence of new and popular consumption scenarios. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the total retail sales of social consumer goods increased by 7.2% year-on-year in 2023, while service retail sales saw a significant jump of 19.5%, confirming that consumption remains a powerful engine for economic growth.

Within this landscape, tourism has emerged as a particularly strong performer. Data from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism indicates that in 2023, domestic travel accounted for 4.891 billion trips, a 93.3% increase from the previous year. Total spending by domestic tourists reached 4.91 trillion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 140.3%. These figures represent a recovery to 81.38% of the 2019 levels for travel volume and 85.69% for tourism revenue, respectively. The tourism market demonstrated strong, sustained vitality and a powerful recovery throughout the year and into the first half of the current year, illustrating the industry's role as a catalyst for broad economic prosperity.

Behind this vibrant picture, the tourism industry is undergoing a profound transformation. Consumers are demanding more from their travel experiences. From the craze for Zibo barbecue to the ice and snow festival in Harbin and the viral popularity of Tianshui Malatang, consumers have demonstrated that the era of experience-is-king has arrived. A growing number of tourists are willing to pay a premium for emotional fulfillment. The economic success of these "viral" destinations—Harbin earning 6 billion yuan in three days and Zibo's GDP exceeding 100 billion yuan in the first quarter—proves that products and services capable of providing emotional value can stand out in a market where supply generally exceeds demand. As the industry shifts toward an experience-based model, consumers are prioritizing the emotional and spiritual satisfaction derived from travel, willingly paying more for a superior experience.

2. Theoretical Framework of Emotional Value

The concept of emotional value, originating from the fields of marketing and economics, explores the significant impact of emotions on human experiences, decision-making, and behavior.

2.1 The Definition of Emotional Value

Emotional value pertains to the role emotions play in an individual's experience of happiness and the overall importance of emotional experiences in life. It can be understood as an individual's perception and evaluation of an emotional experience in a specific context, encompassing the effects of both positive emotions (e.g., joy,

satisfaction, happiness) and negative emotions (e.g., anger, disappointment, fear). Furthermore, "emotional value" is intrinsically linked to product value, as it directly influences a consumer's evaluation of a product or service and, consequently, their purchasing behavior.

2.2 The Origin of Emotional Value

The theory of emotional value was first proposed in 2001 by Jeffrey J. Bailey, a professor at the University of Idaho's College of Business and Economics, from the perspective of relationship marketing between customers and brand enterprises. Initially, the theory was used to explain emotional value as the difference between the emotional benefits and emotional costs perceived by a customer during the shopping process. While the functional attributes and use-value of a product satisfy basic needs, consumers increasingly focus on the "added emotional value" when making a purchase. This includes symbolic meaning, identity affirmation, and social needs associated with the product. Businesses enhance this emotional value through packaging design or by creating unique cultural connotations and service values. Over time, the concept has expanded into broader daily life and other industries.

2.3 Emotional Value in the Tourism Industry

In the context of the tourism industry, emotional value is the capacity to provide tourists with positive, uplifting, and pleasant emotional experiences. This value extends beyond simple amusement; it involves mobilizing the tourist's emotional resonance through a comprehensive experience integrating content, scenes, atmosphere, and service. When tourists feel joy, relaxation, and satisfaction during their travels, they form a deeper emotional connection and sense of identification with the destination, which in turn influences their consumption desires and purchasing decisions(2020)[1].

3. Analysis of Tourists' Demand for Emotional Value

To successfully cater to modern tourists, the tourism industry must deeply understand their needs and emotional drivers. The phenomenon of tourists prioritizing emotional value over price is rooted in several profound psychological and social factors.

3.1 Prioritizing Experience Over Material Possessions

In modern tourism, travelers increasingly focus on the emotional journey and overall feeling of their trip rather than on material acquisitions. They recognize that the emotional value derived from a memorable travel experience—such as joy, relaxation, or excitement—is immeasurable in monetary terms. Consequently, price alone has become a less influential factor in their decision-making process(2019)[2]. Unlike traditional sightseeing, many tourists now travel great distances to a city for a novel or fun experience, which could be anything from eating a specific meal, watching a game, or even just listening to a song. This trend reflects a shift in what constitutes a travel destination, where the core of emotional value is emotional resonance that ultimately translates into economic value.

3.2 The Enduring Nature of Emotional Satisfaction

A travel experience rich in emotional value leaves a lasting impression on tourists, becoming a cherished memory. The durability of this emotional satisfaction far outlasts fleeting material pleasures. Tourists are willing to pay for experiences that can positively influence their emotional state long-term, as these experiences provide a sustained sense of happiness and fulfillment. From the "special forces-style tourism" of visiting eight attractions in one day to the immersive "Citywalk," the tranquil "lie-flat" stay in a countryside homestay, or the "reverse travel" to less-crowded destinations, people are seeking mental and spiritual comfort. This pursuit aligns with the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs—self-actualization—with many using travel as a means of self-healing.

3.3 Social Identity and Self-Realization

Tourism is both a personal and a social activity. Travelers use their journeys to express their taste, personality, and lifestyle, seeking connection and a sense of belonging with others. In this context, a high-emotional-value travel experience can bolster a tourist's sense of social identity and self-realization(2016)[3]. They are willing to purchase products or services that enhance their social standing and self-image. This is evident in trends like traveling to specific locations for Hanfu or Joseon-era clothing photoshoots, trying trendy local crafts like "hairpin flower art", or waiting in line at an iconic photo spot. In chasing these trends, tourists connect with destinations, earn praise on social media, and gain the satisfaction of being fashionable.

3.4 Demand for Personalization and Differentiation

As the tourism market matures, the demand for personalized and differentiated products and services is growing. Such offerings often provide unique emotional experiences tailored to the specific needs and preferences of travelers. When faced with these unique offerings, price becomes a secondary consideration. For instance, a

growing number of tourists prefer to avoid crowded attractions, opting instead for quieter cities where they can enjoy peace, comfort, and the surprise of discovery. There is also a rising interest in immersive, deep-dive experiences that capture the "new pyrotechnics" or authentic, everyday vibrancy of a city. The saying "the smoky, lively air of the human world is what most soothes the mortal heart" captures this sentiment, as this atmosphere can soothe worries and evoke a sense of warmth. This shows that contemporary tourists use consumption to express their attitude toward life, seeking a personal sanctuary and validation within their social circles.

3.5 Evolving Consumer Attitudes

Modern consumer attitudes are undergoing a profound shift away from a sole focus on material satisfaction and utility toward a greater emphasis on spiritual enjoyment and emotional experience. This change directly influences tourists to prioritize emotional value over price. The Zibo barbecue phenomenon is a prime example: in March, it exploded on social media, sparking a massive travel trend. Tourists who traveled by high-speed rail or plane were seeking more than just flavor; they were pursuing social interaction, a lively atmosphere, food culture, and the spontaneity of a "say-yes-and-go" trip. On social media, Zibo barbecue's "soulful trio" of a small stove, thin pancakes, and scallions with dipping sauce was described as a metaphor for an attitude toward life: warmth, tolerance, and forthrightness. This highlights a departure from traditional tourism focused on grand landscapes and historical sites. Today's consumers prefer to discover local "human vibrancy" and slow down to deeply experience a city's culture and lifestyle, willingly paying for elements that create unique life experiences and reflect an authentic quality of life.

The shift in consumer focus from "things" (resources, products) to "people" (personalized needs, psychological satisfaction) is clear. Destinations that successfully leverage emotional marketing are naturally becoming more popular. The following case studies and strategies illustrate how the tourism industry can optimize for emotional value.

4. Implementation Paths and Optimization Strategies

4.1 Implementation Paths

4.1.1 Complementarity Between Scenario Value and Emotional Value

In Chongqing's Ciqikou Ancient Town, the unique Bayu architecture, winding stone-paved streets, and bustling markets create a rich physical scene. Visitors can see traditional teahouses, ancient temples, and countless snack stalls. However, what truly captivates them is the feeling of liveliness and "Fireworks"—the friendly human interactions and a nostalgic connection to an older way of life. This emotional value makes the scene more vivid and meaningful, fostering a sense of belonging and identity among tourists.

Similarly, Xi'an's Great Tang All Day Mall offers a magnificent scene with its grand architecture, brilliant lights, and spectacular performances. But its core appeal is emotional: visitors feel as though they have been transported back to the glorious and heroic Tang Dynasty. This powerful emotional resonance leaves a lasting impression.

4.1.2 Enhancing Tourist Emotional Value Through Exceptional Service

In 2024, local governments have fully embraced a strategy of "pampering" their guests. For instance, the city of Yangzhou made a concerted effort to "focus on providing emotional value for tourists and enhancing their travel experience." Practical measures included opening 42 government facility parking lots with 2,481 spaces for free, opening public restrooms, and providing hot water and information services. Visitors with non-local ID cards could also ride city buses for free. Furthermore, over 600 volunteers were stationed at key scenic spots and intersections to offer warm and thoughtful assistance. These services made tourists feel as welcome and comfortable as if they were at home, generating extensive praise on social media.

Likewise, during the May Day holiday, Jiyuan City coordinated multiple departments to ensure tourist safety and satisfaction. This included joint safety inspections by police, market supervision, and fire departments; proactive crowd management during peak hours; and rigorous food safety checks at hotels and restaurants. Volunteer teams in "red vests" provided free charging stations, directions, and first-aid kits. These measures effectively "pampered" guests and maximized their emotional value, leading to a significant increase in tourism: on the first day of the holiday, Jiyuan received 420,500 tourists (an 11.39% increase year-on-year), generating 209 million yuan in revenue (a 17.8% increase).

4.1.3 Developing Immersive Cultural Tourism Products

Immersive cultural tourism projects, which integrate visual, tactile, auditory, and olfactory experiences, have become new market favorites(2020)[4].By creating unique scenes and atmospheres, they allow tourists to gain deep emotional and spiritual resonance through interaction.

For example,

Only Henan: Land of Dramas uses the Yellow River civilization as its creative foundation, employing immersive theater and a unique "fantasy city" architectural design. It tells stories of "land, grain, and inheritance" through 56 different spatial environments, creating a multi-dimensional and immersive experience that allows visitors to feel the weight and charm of history.

Super Wenheyong in Changsha achieves immersion by meticulously recreating the city's old market life. Through holographic design, it ensures that everything guests see, touch, and experience feels authentic and historically grounded. This allows visitors to feel a strong sense of identification and resonance with the local culture(2021)[5].

4.2 Key Optimization Strategies for the Tourism Industry

Based on the analysis of these successful cases, the following optimization paths are recommended for the tourism industry:

4.2.1 Focusing on Emotional Resonance and Value Conversion

Emotional elements designed into tourism products can touch consumers' hearts, trigger emotional resonance, and enhance the travel experience. This leads to positive emotions like joy and relaxation, which in turn increase satisfaction. At the same time, emotional value creates added value for tourism products, aiding in their economic conversion(2021)[6]. This makes destinations and products more attractive and competitive, boosting market share and profitability. For example, the giant panda "Hua Hua" in Chengdu has become more than just an animal; she is an emotional anchor and a symbol of the pursuit of a better life, leading to her appointment as an "honorary director" of the Chengdu Cultural and Tourism Bureau. One platform estimated that each tourist drawn by Hua Hua contributes at least 1,075 yuan to the local economy. Therefore, the industry must understand its target audience and design products that resonate emotionally to stimulate consumption and ensure loyalty.

4.2.2 Strengthening Destination Brand Image and Cultural Connotation

When tourists have a positive emotional response to a service or product, they associate that feeling with the destination, thereby enhancing its brand influence. The popularity of the character LinaBell at Shanghai Disneyland is a prime example of consumption driven by emotion. Her cute appearance and witty interactions with guests created a huge fanbase, with a 200-yuan doll once selling for ten times its original price. Shanghai Disneyland's success is partly due to its ability to provide a "carrier" for emotions, creating a closed loop that establishes an emotional link between the project and the consumer. The industry should therefore focus on providing emotionally valuable products and services to boost brand image(2019)[7]. Using sensory stimuli (visual, olfactory, auditory, etc.) to shape perception and memory can significantly improve a destination's competitiveness(2019)[8].

4.2.3 Improving Tourism Service Quality and Experience

High-quality supporting facilities are foundational to enhancing tourists' emotional value. This includes investing in "dual-use" infrastructure that serves both normal and peak periods, such as adding rest areas, improving restrooms, and providing convenient transportation. Service quality is equally critical. Providing professional tourism services, high-quality accommodations, and rich entertainment options can make tourists feel the warmth and comfort of home. Additionally, the emotional labor of tour guides has a significant impact on tourists' emotional experience and perception of a destination. Governments and companies should enhance guides' emotional labor skills through training and management to promote the transmission of positive emotions.

4.2.4 Utilizing Technological Innovation to Enhance the Tourist Experience

Technology offers new opportunities for the tourism industry. Virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI) can create richer and more immersive travel experiences that satisfy consumer desires for novelty and excitement. By crafting emotionally resonant stories, personalized interactions, and unique sensory experiences, destinations can create unforgettable moments and cater to a wide range of emotional needs.

4.2.5 Optimizing Services Through Analysis of Tourist Reviews

Using sentiment analysis techniques, such as normalized scoring and comprehensive evaluation models, tourism managers can automatically analyze the emotional leanings in online reviews(2019)[9]. This allows them to extract positive and negative emotional themes and capture tourists' true feelings about a destination(2020)[10]. This data not only helps in optimizing tourism services but also provides a scientific basis for shaping the destination's image and marketing strategies, progressively improving tourist satisfaction and the destination's reputation.

5. Conclusion

This paper, based on the theory of emotional value, has analyzed the emotional demands of modern tourists and proposed several optimization strategies. By focusing on emotional resonance and value conversion, strengthening brand image, elevating service quality, embracing technological innovation, and leveraging tourist feedback, the tourism industry can innovate its business models to meet the emotional needs of consumers and achieve high-quality development.

However, it is crucial to recognize that emotional value is a double-edged sword in tourism development. While tourists "paying for emotional value" have created viral destinations and powerful new consumer drivers, this heightened visibility also means that any negative incidents at a destination can be amplified by the same viral mechanisms. Therefore, tourism providers cannot rely solely on short-term "revenge consumption." Instead, they must commit to long-term, sustained efforts to continuously improve the quality of their tourism offerings.

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