

ASSESSING BARRIERS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ART TOURISM AT DUNHUANG MOGAO CAVES

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INTRODUCTION

A deep connection exists between tourism and art, with many artistic creations being influenced by travel and travel being inspired by art (Kuznets & Niblett, 2021). Most tourism research has considered art as a form of cultural tourism (McKercher & Du Cros, 2002). In general, cultural tourism can be divided into two types: the first type is tourism in which people travel to see and explore the cultures of other people. This type of tourism refers to the way of life of the people in the destination visited and their habits, dress, food, behaviour, lifestyle and others (Richards, 2018). The second form of cultural tourism includes visiting museums, galleries, opera houses and other art institutions, including attending art events (Franklin & Papastergiadis, 2017). This type of 'cultural tourism' is closest to the definition of art tourism, where art is the primary motivation for tourism (Adrian Franklin, 2018). From a marketing theory perspective, art conveys symbolic messages that shape what a city means to people (i.e. city brand meaning) and can help co-create and advance a city's brand. In other words, a city has unique artistic resources that can help attract visitors (Green, Grace & Perkins, 2018). Art tourism has been studied separately from cultural tourism in recent years, and the research fervour is increasing (Slak Valek & Mura, 2023).

The Chinese government is vigorously combining the culture and tourism industries. For some cities with a long artistic heritage and history, art naturally becomes a signature of the city's culture. Dunhuang has been a node city on the Silk Road since ancient times and is known worldwide for its Dunhuang Grottoes, which have developed rapidly since the Chinese government launched the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. From 2013 to 2019, the number of visitors to Dunhuang grew from 4.02 million to 13.37 million (The Xinhua News Agency, 2023). Based on the definition of art tourism mentioned above, cultural tourism in Dunhuang focuses on the art tourism component.

This study reviews the development of art tourism in Dunhuang. In previous studies, different tourism industries have encountered various barriers to their development. For example, in the study of MICE tourism in Macau, the results show that economy, capacity, infrastructure, human resources, marketing, regulations and transportation are the main obstacles to MICE development (Chen & Luo, 2021). Similar studies that focus on tourists' perspectives are currently less available in the field of art tourism. This study examines the barriers encountered in the development of cities that have made significant efforts to develop art tourism. We collected non-complimentary reviews from mainstream Chinese Internet travel review sites and OTA websites of travellers who visited Dunhuang in the past year and the Mogao Caves, known as the 'Louvre of the East,' through qualitative analysis. We also identified the factors that hinder the development of art tourism in Dunhuang today: regulations and supervision, artistic and cultural content, human resources management and infrastructure and facilities. In addition, this study looks at art tourism in Dunhuang, and explores the dimensions that are highly important to tourists who participate in art tourism. Some of these dimensions may be

overlooked by governments and businesses in their development and may provide references for future government and business development of art tourism and future research on art tourism. This study also gives its definition and understanding of art tourism and distinguishes it from traditional cultural tourism. Moreover, this study analyses the parts of Dunhuang art tourism that need to be strengthened for future development.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used in this study. Generally, a qualitative research method is a type of research that is conducted without statistical or quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Qualitative research is usually used when the variables associated with a study are difficult to measure or describe. Moreover, when studies in the field are relatively few and the study is exploratory in nature, grounded theory is generally used (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The field of this study, art tourism, is less researched. Hence, art tourism is also mainly studied in non-Chinese countries worldwide. Meanwhile, as a Chinese city, Dunhuang has a worldwide reputation. However, the tourism research in Dunhuang is very limited, so we can assume that art tourism in Dunhuang is a new area that has not been fully researched. This study is exploratory in nature; hence, grounded theory is used. The data analysis method used in this study is content analysis, which summarises the factors that make the current Mogao Caves art tourism development inadequate owing to the poor evaluation of visitor experience. The data were sourced from Ctrip and Meituan (two of the largest OTA platforms in China), and Xiaohongshu, the most popular travel-sharing website in China. We also tried to use TripAdvisor, a popular travel review site for foreigners, for data collection, however, the data were less available. Considering that the main research goal of this study is to explore barriers, the reviews selected were all non-complimentary reviews from various websites. We selected reviews from the above-mentioned platforms for the past year, removing reviews that were full of praise, then those that were too short (less than 15 Chinese characters) and those that were full of repetitions and unclear expressions. The final 103 reviews, to fulfil our request, were coded using Nvivo software for three levels of coding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Mogao Caves have a long history and deep artistic heritage, which are its unique core competencies and have the potential to attract tourists. However, several deficiencies still exist that significantly affect the visitor experience. The factors include infrastructure and facilities, visitor experience perception, human resource management, policies and regulations. According to the content analysis method, the poor service attitude of staff, poor professionalism and the pitfalls in ticket sales create additional disgust among visitors. In addition, many of the reviews include negative statements, such as ‘never coming back’ and ‘not recommending anyone else to go there at all’.

To better attract tourists, promote traditional Chinese art and culture and promote the art of Dunhuang to a wide audience, the local government should first strengthen the construction of infrastructure, such as enriching transportation routes. In addition, the market supervision department should exercise strict supervision over ticket sales, eliminating problems such as bundled sales and temporary price increase sales. The scenic area management should increase investment in human resources training, increase the professionalism of employees and set up staff service assessment to eliminate the problem of poor attitude of employees. In addition, in enhancing the experience of tourists’ perception, the scenic area should open additional visit content at the right time, optimise the visit route and improve the unreasonable or insufficient

facilities and other problems. These can bring tourists a great experience and bring a good reputation to the local tourism market.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study identifies four barriers that affect the development of art tourism in Dunhuang: regulations and supervision, artistic and cultural content, human resource management and infrastructure and facilities. To overcome these barriers, governments and administrations should improve laws and regulations to ensure the rights and interests of tourists, regulate local travel service providers, and increase investment in infrastructure. For scenic spot managers, they should strengthen the vocational skills training of their staff, improve the staff service assessment mechanism and enrich the cultural and artistic contents. In practice, the results of this study can help investors in the art tourism industry to better understand the tourism market and help scenic managers to understand the focus of tourism promotion and the parts that need to be improved. Theoretically, this study provides an explanation to further understand the impact of electronic word-of-mouth on the image of scenic spots, including logic. Furthermore, this study provides theoretical support for policymakers and can also help Dunhuang to promote traditional art and culture.

Keywords: Human resource management, infrastructure and facilities, policies and regulations, visitor experience perception

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