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Placemaking as a driver for co-creation in cultural tourism in rural Zimbabwe – the scope for creative entrepreneurs and tour operators

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Abstract

African rural communities are the custodians for cultural heritage, and this presents a unique potential for cultural tourism. Co-creation as a product development strategy or a product promotion strategy would serve to provide skills and resources to sustain placemaking and to give authenticity to the cultural tourist's experience. Placemaking in rural tourism is predicated by the inclusion of local communities as the custodians of the culture which is the central product in cultural tourism. Creative Entrepreneurs, particularly producers of cultural artifacts, can contribute to the stories and heritage of the people who live in rural communities. This paper will be a qualitative investigation designed to explore previous research on placemaking and the appropriateness of co-creation in placemaking.

Keywords: Placemaking, Co-creation, Cultural Tourism, Rural Tourism, Creative Entrepreneurship

Introduction

Creative Industries and the tourism sector in Zimbabwe share a lot of similarities in how they have each evolved since the turn of the century. One particular similarity is their shared reliance on inbound tourist for demand which suffered significantly from macro environmental shocks caused by political unrest and international unease towards Zimbabwe following the farm invasions of 2000, (Makoni & Chikobvu, 2021). More recently the impact of Covid-19 had similar if not more catastrophic impact on both creative industries and the tourism sector as inbound tourists stopped travelling to Zimbabwe as travel stopped across the world, (Makoni & Tichaawa, 2021). Zimbabwe has a rich heritage of stone sculpture and communities of stones sculptors where generations have succeeded one another keep this heritage alive, (Larkin, 2011; Meldrum, 1994; Muguti & Zibengwa, 2022). Sculptor communities like Tengenenge in Guruve, Zimbabwe have produced world renowned pieces of work that are displayed around the world and there are many other communities such as the basket weavers of Binga and Masvingo that can play host to cultural tourists, leveraging indigenous knowledge and practices, (Maisiri & Ngulube, 2022).

It is in this context of weak tourism demand that this paper seeks to propose co-creation as a possible solution for creative industries and tourism operators to work together applying a placemaking approach to drive cultural tourism in Zimbabwe. The paper will focus on entrepreneurial artists from the creative industries and the rural communities they come from. Cultural tourism in rural areas is noted for its potential to revitalise rural economies, (Wang, 2023) and (Zielinski et al., 2020), as well as creating a platform for rural communities to share their culture and heritage themselves.

The appropriateness of value co-creation and placemaking approach as viable strategies is explored further in the literature review. However, it is worth noting that as a combination of strategies, co-creation and placemaking share similarities which, in our opinion, make them a powerful proposition if applied correctly and effectively. Nonetheless, there are some barriers to effective application such as the need for existing knowledge and skills to apply these strategies as well as willingness for cooperation between stakeholders.

Literature review

This paper proposes the application of value co-creation and a placemaking approach as a strategy to develop and increase cultural tourism in Zimbabwe's sculptor communities. The key concepts in this proposal, value co-creation and placemaking are explored briefly below.

Value co-creation

Grönroos, (2012) and Ramaswamy & Ozcan, (2018) define value co-creation as the joint actions of producer and customers or other beneficiaries in creating a service or product for mutual benefit. (Hamidi et al., 2019) go further to suggest that joint actions in value co-creation can be a complex interaction of individuals, organisation, technology and shared information. Understanding that value co-creation is a complex process is especially important when considering how it can be applied in the context of this paper. The communities in which this research is set do not operate on the same understanding or with the same knowledge and skills of entrepreneurship Tshikovhi (2021) as the western contexts in which the above definitions of value co-creation were developed. Much will be gained from conducting primary research into the existing knowledge of entrepreneurship and value co-creation in the target communities.

Placemaking approach in tourism

Placemaking is widely recognised as a useful approach to developing rural and cultural tourism in which local communities are viewed key contributors to the touristic experience, (Markusen & Nicodemus, 2014). However, (Lew, 2019) suggested that it is important that the process of placemaking does not influence or manipulate the essence of the place. Placemaking is a deliberate process in which a community like the sculptors of Guruve, Zimbabwe and tourism operators work together to create a destination in which tourists can experience the culture of sculpting, the heritage that sustains it and the people who are the custodians.

Application of placemaking and co-creation

(Wyckoff, 2014) identified four types of placemaking whereby standard placemaking is the overarching approach and within it are three other types of placemaking namely Creative Placemaking, Strategic Placemaking and Tactical Placemaking. Creative Placemaking is defined by (Markusen & Nicodemus, 2014) as deliberate strategic action by a group of stakeholders centred around a place with arts and culture as the core activities. The coming together of stakeholders, (Lew, 2019) who could include the community, tour operators and artists or sculptors in the case of this paper creates the first pre-condition for value co-creation: the joint action of multiple parties in creative placemaking, (Ross, 2020).

The driver for stakeholder engagement with co-creation in creative placemaking in Guruve are mutual benefits of working together, (Mijnheer & Gamble, 2019), to bring tourists to the place, opportunity for local guides to create cultural experiences for tourists in exchange for payment, opportunities for sculptors to sell their art to tourists and for tour operators, Guruve becomes a cultural tourism destination to promote to local, regional and international tourists, (Woyo & Woyo, 2018). However, as much as this seems a straightforward proposition, Dias et al., (2018) suggests it is prudent to pay attention to potential sources of value co-destruction such as lack of understanding of roles, diminished motivation due to mistrust and over estimation of tourist demand. Makoni & Chikobvu (2021) suggests research to understand demand and modelling future demand can be an effective tool to anticipate demand for tourism in Zimbabwe. Torfing et al. (2019) recommends developing a clear understanding of barriers and risks to co-creation and proactive development of mitigating strategies to known barriers and risks.

Proposed research questions

This research will investigate the applicability of western centric theories of placemaking and value co-creation to the Zimbabwean context as a solution to the prevailing challenges faced by entrepreneurial artists in creating sustainable demand for their artistic product. The research is guided by the following research questions.

- 1) To explore host communities and entrepreneurial artists' perception of value co-creation and creative placemaking concepts
- 2) To determine possible barriers and drivers of co-creation between entrepreneurial artists and tour operators for the purposes of placemaking
- 3) What strategies can be applied to influence the adoption and application of value co-creation and creative placemaking in developing cultural tourism within rural communities of Zimbabwe?

Proposed data collection

This paper primarily intends to investigate the possibilities of bringing together creative entrepreneurs and tour operators in order to create cultural tourism products that can create mutual benefits for all stakeholders. Given the research questions stated above, the proposed research will provide insight into the lived experiences of entrepreneurial artists and tour operators as a means to understand the challenges in developing sustainable demand for their products and services. To manage the size of the sample the research will focus on sculptors from Guruve, Zimbabwe and tour operators that specialise in cultural tourism in that region of Zimbabwe.

This qualitative research will employ an inductive approach to data collection with grounded theory guiding the observations and interview questions. Induction and grounded theory have the provide the qualitative characteristics (flexibility, adaptability and applicability to under researched paradigm) that will enable the research to gather data required to build an understanding of where co-creation and placemaking sit within the creative and cultural industry in Zimbabwe. Data collection will be in the form of interactions with the target participants in their local environment to observe and interact with them in their natural setting. The research methodology for data collection will be comprised of face-to-face interviews with tour operators and focus groups with entrepreneurial artists from the communities in Guruve. The purpose of the interviews and focus groups is to collect narrative and individual stories/experiences to build a picture. Participants will be randomly selected from samples of the target groups. The primary research will be conducted in the summer so results will be available for presentation at the conference in September.

Relevance of the research

This research will help to build understanding of the applicability of placemaking in the entrepreneurial artist communities where cultural tourism can play a key role in creating livelihoods for rural communities. Additionally, the research will also show that value co-creation can be an effective tool in placemaking where multiple stakeholders work together to create cultural tourism products that benefit all participants.

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