

Original Research Article

From cultural experience to commercial value: A study on the formation mechanism of tourists' consumption behavior in cultural tourism contexts

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the deepening integration of the experience economy and cultural tourism, immersive cultural tourism has gradually emerged as a key setting for driving cultural consumption and the development of the night-time economy. Taking the Datang Everbright City as a case study, this paper focuses on tourists participating in cultural experiences and consumption activities as its primary interview subjects. Combining the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework with grounded theory methodology, it employs semi-structured interviews to analyze the underlying mechanisms of 'how cultural experiences are transformed into consumption behavior and generate commercial value.' The research reveals that visitors' consumption behavior does not stem solely from functional needs but is gradually formed through emotional and identification mechanisms, building upon cultural stimuli and immersive experiences. Specifically, cultural symbols, spatial atmosphere, and interactive performances enhance visitors' sense of presence and immersion, transforming them from 'spectators' into 'participants'; subsequently, emotional arousal, cultural resonance, identity expression, and social influence further reinforce the value of the experience and drive the formation of consumption motives. Factors such as commemorative significance, the desire for memorable photographs, peer influence, and value judgements further facilitate consumption decisions, giving rise to consumption behaviors at different levels. Simultaneously, through social sharing and word-of-mouth dissemination, tourists create a cyclical diffusion mechanism of "Experience—Consumption—Dissemination—Re-attraction," extending commercial value from on-site consumption to traffic dissemination and sustained visitor attraction. By constructing a mechanism model of "Cultural experience—Emotional and identity mechanisms—Consumption conversion—Generation of commercial value," this paper provides a new process-oriented explanation for research into immersive cultural tourism consumption.

Keywords: immersive cultural experience; cultural tourism; tourist emotions; tourist consumption behavior; commercial value

1. Introduction

With the continuous development of the experience economy, consumer demands have undergone significant changes. Compared with the traditional consumption model centered on product functions and service quality, contemporary consumers place greater emphasis on emotional experiences, psychological satisfaction, and personalized perceptions. Influenced by this trend, the tourism industry has gradually shifted from "sightseeing tourism" to "experiential tourism" ^[1]. Tourists are no longer satisfied with simple visits to scenic attractions; instead, they increasingly value cultural participation, emotional resonance, and immersive experiences throughout the travel process. Particularly in the context of the rapid expansion of social media, tourism activities have evolved beyond leisure behavior and have become an important means of emotional expression, lifestyle presentation, and social interaction ^[2].

Against this background, the cultural tourism industry is experiencing a profound transformation from a "Resource-oriented" model to an "Experience-oriented" model. Traditional cultural tourism primarily relied on natural landscapes, historical sites, and cultural resources themselves to attract visitors, with consumption activities mainly centered on sightseeing and basic tourism services. However, with the continuous integration of culture and tourism, static cultural displays alone can no longer satisfy the increasingly diversified needs of tourists^[3]. Consequently, an increasing number of tourism destinations have begun to enhance visitor participation and experiential engagement through immersive performances, historical scene reconstruction, interactive intangible cultural heritage experiences, digital cultural spaces, and role-based participation. Such developments have gradually transformed tourists from "passive viewers" into "active participants." This shift not only strengthens tourists' emotional involvement but also enhances their sense of cultural identity and memory toward local culture.

Meanwhile, the connotation of cultural tourism consumption has also been continuously evolving. Contemporary tourists consume not only products and services during their travel experiences, but also atmospheres, emotions, and cultural experiences^[4]. Through immersive settings, tourists obtain emotional satisfaction; through interactive participation, they establish cultural connections; and through social media platforms, they engage in sharing and self-expression^[5-6]. For instance, tourists wearing traditional Hanfu costumes for photography in historical and cultural districts, participating in plot interactions within immersive performances, or engaging in handicraft production in intangible cultural heritage experience programs have gone beyond the traditional understanding of tourism consumption. These activities increasingly reflect forms of emotional consumption and identity expression.

In recent years, immersive cultural tourism projects represented by Only Henan · Drama Fantasy City, The Longest Day in Chang'an Theme Block, and Datang Everbright City have rapidly emerged and generated extensive influence nationwide. Through spatial narratives, the reconstruction of cultural symbols, and interactive scene design, these projects transform local historical culture into participatory, experiential, and highly shareable consumption scenarios. On the one hand, such projects enhance tourists' sense of cultural participation and emotional immersion, thereby promoting the modern dissemination of traditional culture^[7]. On the other hand, they also generate significant commercial effects in areas such as tourist consumption, cultural and creative product development, brand communication, and social media marketing^[8].

Within immersive cultural tourism settings, the role of tourists is undergoing substantial transformation. Tourists are no longer merely "spectators" but are gradually becoming "participants" and "disseminators" of cultural experiences^[9]. Many tourists actively engage in the dissemination of cultural content through activities such as taking photos, sharing short videos, and interacting on social media platforms, further strengthening their consumption intentions and cultural identification during this process. For example, after attending immersive performances, many tourists purchase locally themed cultural and creative products to extend their emotional experiences. At the same time, they share travel-related content on online social platforms, thereby further expanding the influence of cultural experience dissemination^[10]. This integrated model of "Experience—Consumption—Dissemination—Re-attraction" has gradually transformed cultural tourism from a traditional sightseeing industry into a comprehensive consumption scenario that simultaneously incorporates cultural communication, emotional experience, and commercial operation.

It can thus be observed that, within the context of the experience economy and the integration of culture and tourism, cultural tourism consumption has gradually shifted from traditional functional consumption toward a new consumption model centered on emotional value, identity expression, and participatory experiences. Cultural resources are no longer merely static objects of display; instead, they have increasingly become important mediating factors that stimulate tourists' emotional identification, promote consumption transformation, and generate commercial value. Accordingly, explaining the underlying mechanism through which cultural experiences are transformed into consumption behavior and ultimately into commercial value has become a significant issue deserving in-depth exploration in contemporary cultural tourism research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural tourism and immersive experience

Early studies on cultural tourism primarily focused on resource endowments, landscape appreciation, and service quality, emphasizing the influence of cultural heritage and local symbols as tourism attractions on tourists' visitation decisions and behavioral choices^[4]. Within this framework, culture was largely regarded as content available for "display," while tourist experience was often understood as the evaluative outcome of landscapes and services. However, with the rise of the experience economy and the deepening integration of culture and tourism, research perspectives have gradually shifted from a "resource–service" orientation to an "experience–process" orientation. Increasing attention has been paid to tourists' perceptions, participation, and meaning construction within specific cultural spaces, highlighting experience itself as a crucial mechanism driving behavioral responses^[11-12].

In immersive cultural tourism settings, cultural experience is no longer characterized by the passive reception of cultural content; rather, it is organized into accessible and participatory situational processes through spatial narratives, thematic movement routes, interactive performances, and atmosphere construction^[13]. Tourists gain not only recognition and understanding of cultural elements, but also a sense of presence and immersion associated with "entering the scene." Continuous spatial arrangements and narrative cues guide tourists through situational transitions during their movement within the space, while interactive performances and parade activities further strengthen participatory roles, transforming tourists from spectators into active participants. Consequently, the senses of presence, immersion, and interaction have become important sources of experiential intensity and provide the foundation for subsequent behaviors such as consumption, sharing, and revisit intention^[14].

At the same time, the formation of cultural experiences has increasingly demonstrated characteristics of co-creation and extensibility. On the one hand, experiences are no longer unilaterally provided by destinations; instead, they are jointly constructed through interactions among tourists, companions, crowds, performers, and service providers. Peer influence, observational learning, and real-time interaction may all affect tourists' depth of participation and evaluation of the experience^[15-16]. On the other hand, social media has further expanded the boundaries of experience. Through photographing, editing, and publishing content, tourists transform offline experiences into shareable narratives, while interactions on digital platforms reinforce memory and meaning identification, thereby extending the experience from the "moment of visitation" to the "post-visit dissemination stage"^[17-18].

Unlike traditional scenic destinations that primarily emphasize sightseeing and visual appreciation, immersive cultural spaces place greater emphasis on situational design that "draws" tourists into specific narrative worlds, thereby facilitating a transformation from "viewing landscapes" to "entering scenes." To achieve this objective, immersive projects typically employ a combination of multisensory stimulation and spatial narrative strategies. First, at the visual level, themed architecture, lighting installations, and symbolic settings are utilized to strengthen cultural recognizability^[19]. Second, at the auditory level, music, ambient sounds, and narrative language are adopted to construct emotional atmospheres, while props, installations, and environmental details further enhance authenticity and the sense of presence^[20]. At the same time, continuous movement routes and zonal spatial layouts organize the experience into a progressive process, enabling tourists to gradually enter the situational context while maintaining experiential continuity during spatial movement. This design reduces the sense of disengagement caused by fragmented browsing.

More importantly, immersive cultural tourism commonly enhances tourists' agency through interactive performances, parade activities, and participatory mechanisms. Interactive performances no longer position tourists merely as spectators; instead, through real-time communication, role-based guidance, and participatory plots, tourists gain experiences of being responded to and incorporated into the narrative, thereby increasing their level of involvement. Participatory activities further strengthen tourists' subjectivity, transforming them from "passive recipients" into "active participants"^[19,21]. In this process, experience is not completed instantaneously but is gradually generated through continuous choices, interactions, and feedback, through which experiential intensity and meaning are progressively

accumulated.

The construction of meaning within immersive experiences also demonstrates significant characteristics of co-creation. Tourists jointly shape experiential content and atmosphere through interactions with performers, companions, and surrounding participants. The guidance and real-time feedback provided by performers influence tourists' willingness to participate, discussions and encouragement among companions shape the rhythm of the experience, while the demonstrations and observations of others contribute to the formation of collective participation atmospheres and social norms ^[22-23]. Consequently, experience is no longer merely the outcome of one-way "provision" by tourism projects, but rather a process of co-production through multi-subject interaction.

Furthermore, immersive environments not only influence tourists' depth of participation but may also reshape their pathways of emotional transformation ^[24]. Compared with the relatively stable emotional experiences associated with traditional sightseeing tourism, immersive settings are more likely to trigger emotional arousal through atmospheric rendering, narrative progression, and interactive feedback, thereby generating emotional accumulation and continuity during sustained participation. Climactic performances, interactive responses, and ritualized scenes often become key emotional nodes that stimulate feelings of surprise, excitement, emotional touch, or resonance among tourists. These emotional responses subsequently lead to stronger behavioral engagement, such as prolonged stay duration, increased expenditure on paid experiences, commemorative purchases, and social media sharing ^[25].

2.2. Tourist consumption logic and value spillover

Within traditional frameworks, tourism consumption research has largely been grounded in the assumption of rational decision-making, commonly explaining consumption intention, revisit intention, and recommendation behavior through variables such as perceived value ^[26], satisfaction ^[27], destination image ^[28], and service quality ^[29]. Such studies emphasize that tourists make choices based on cost-benefit evaluations, with consumption primarily understood as the functional purchase of products and services. However, in cultural tourism contexts, tourist consumption behavior can hardly be fully explained solely by functional demands and cost-effectiveness. What tourists purchase is not merely "goods" or "services," but also emotional experiences, the continuation of memories, and the recognition of meaning ^[30]. Particularly within immersive cultural spaces, consumption and experiential processes are highly intertwined, with consumption often serving as an important means of extending experiences and consolidating meaning.

From the perspective of specific forms, cultural tourism consumption demonstrates stronger symbolic and situational characteristics. Purchases of cultural and creative products often carry commemorative meanings and enable tourists to "take away" cultural symbols, with their value not being entirely determined by practical functionality. Paid experiential programs not only provide opportunities for participation, but also correspond to tourists' demands for "complete experiences" and deeper immersion ^[31]. For example, consumption activities such as Hanfu rental, costume styling, and accompanying photography services more directly reflect tourists' pursuit of ritualistic experience, identity presentation, and social display. For many tourists, the process of "wearing Hanfu-entering the scene-taking photos-sharing content" is not an additional activity beyond the experience itself, but rather an integral component of immersive cultural experiences ^[32]. This indicates that cultural tourism consumption has gradually evolved from a logic centered primarily on functional satisfaction toward a more comprehensive consumption model integrating emotional value, identity expression, and participatory engagement within specific scenarios.

In this transformation process, emotions play a crucial role. Atmospheric rendering, interactive feedback, and narrative progression within immersive settings are more likely to stimulate immediate emotional responses and generate direct consumption motivations. For instance, the emotional impact and resonance created by climactic performances may trigger commemorative purchases; lively crowds and immersive atmospheres may encourage tourists to temporarily choose paid activities; and the emotional inertia associated with the mentality of "since I am already here" may further promote higher levels of consumption investment ^[33]. Moreover, emotions are not limited to immediate reactions; they may also influence consumption and dissemination through cultural identification and relational bonds. When tourists develop cultural resonance or identity recognition during their experiences, consumption is more

likely to be interpreted as "worthwhile" or "meaningful." Similarly, when interactions among companions and demonstrations by others reinforce senses of ritual and display needs, consumption is more likely to function as a means of self-presentation and social expression ^[34-35].

Within the context of social media, cultural tourism consumption also exhibits prominent characteristics of content production. In order to obtain more visually appealing photos and shareable materials, tourists actively choose services such as accompanying photography, specific "check-in" locations, or paid experiential activities. The feedback received after sharing further reinforces experiential memories and the perceived rationality of consumption decisions ^[32]. Consequently, the connections among experience, consumption, and dissemination in cultural tourism have become increasingly close. These three dimensions are no longer separate and independent stages, but have gradually formed a continuous process characterized by mutual embedding and reinforcement.

For many tourists, tourism experiences occur not only during offline visits, but also throughout the processes of photographing, recording, editing, and sharing content. Activities such as taking photos at landmark locations, posting short videos, and providing online recommendations are not merely expressive behaviors after the completion of an experience; they may also inversely influence tourists' consumption choices and participation patterns during the experience itself. In other words, tourists often make consumption and experiential decisions under the anticipation of future "sharing."

2.3. Structural framework: S–O–R theory

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework emphasizes that external stimuli within an individual's environment do not directly translate into behavioral outcomes; rather, they first influence the individual's internal psychological state, which subsequently triggers corresponding behavioral responses ^[36]. In the present study, the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework provides a process-oriented explanatory path "from context to psychology and then to behavior." This framework is particularly suitable for depicting the generation of behavior in experiential consumption contexts, where multiple factors are intertwined in nonlinear and highly situational ways.

(1) At the "Stimulus" level, cultural symbols, spatial atmosphere, and performance interactions constitute the key situational cues initially perceived by tourists. Themed architecture, antique-style installations, and cultural elements strengthen the cultural recognizability of the setting, while lighting, music, and crowd liveliness jointly create an emotionally engaging atmospheric environment. Meanwhile, parade activities, interactive performances, and behavioral performances provide tourists with opportunities for participation and further enhance their sense of presence and immersion. The combined influence of these external stimuli encourages tourists to enter the scene, remain within it, and continuously participate in the experiential process, thereby forming the foundational conditions for immersive experiences.

(2) At the "Organism" level, tourists' responses to external stimuli are not limited to rational evaluations and judgments; rather, they are more prominently manifested as psychological processes in which emotional arousal and meaning construction are intertwined. During immersive experiences, tourists undergo various emotional changes and gradually develop cultural resonance, identity expression, and ritualistic needs through interactive participation. Some tourists may strengthen their cultural identification through immersive role engagement, while social situations such as "everyone else is taking photos" or the desire to "preserve a complete experience" may further reinforce their needs for self-expression. In addition, interactions among companions, demonstrations by others, and social expectations further amplify these emotional and identification mechanisms, transforming initially immediate experiential feelings into more stable consumption motivations and value judgments.

(3) At the "Response" level, tourists' behavioral outcomes are reflected not only in specific consumption behaviors but also in subsequent dissemination behaviors. The former includes activities such as purchasing cultural and creative products, accompanying photography services, and paid experiential programs, while the latter is manifested through content production behaviors such as taking photos at landmark locations, posting short videos, sharing on social media, and providing word-of-mouth recommendations. These two forms of behavior are not isolated from one another; rather, within immersive cultural settings, they are mutually embedded and mutually reinforcing, jointly constituting important manifestations of commercial

value creation. Particularly in the context of social media, dissemination behaviors further generate feedback effects, continuously extending and amplifying the commercial value of cultural experiences.

2.4. Research review and evaluation

Although research on immersive cultural tourism has increased significantly in recent years, several issues in the existing literature still require further exploration.

(1) Existing studies have mainly focused on outcome variables such as experiential elements, tourist satisfaction, destination image, and revisit intention, emphasizing the influence of immersive atmosphere, performance interaction, and spatial design on tourists' evaluations of experience. However, there remains a lack of systematic explanation regarding the process through which cultural experiences are further transformed into consumption behavior and ultimately generate commercial value. In other words, current research has paid greater attention to whether tourists "enjoy" such experiences, while giving comparatively less consideration to why these experiences stimulate consumption and how consumption subsequently contributes to value diffusion. Against the backdrop of the rapid development of immersive cultural districts, increasingly close interactions have emerged among cultural experiences, consumption behavior, and commercial operations. Consequently, approaches focusing solely on outcome variables such as satisfaction or consumption intention are no longer sufficient to comprehensively capture these dynamic processes.

(2) Although emotions and identity have been frequently discussed in cultural tourism research, most studies remain at the level of conceptual description or variable measurement, lacking detailed depictions of how these factors are formed within specific situational contexts. In reality, tourist consumption behavior is often not derived purely from rational judgment, but is gradually generated under the combined influence of multiple situational factors, including spatial atmosphere, interactive participation, crowd environments, and social expectations. Questions such as when emotional arousal occurs, why cultural resonance emerges, how identity expression and ritualistic feelings are strengthened through interaction, and how these psychological changes further promote consumption decisions all require interpretation through experiential narratives situated within real tourism contexts. Therefore, relying solely on structured scales or analyses of outcome variables often makes it difficult to fully reveal the complex and continuous mechanisms operating within immersive cultural tourism experiences.

(3) Research concerning dissemination and diffusion processes remains relatively limited. Existing literature commonly treats social media sharing, word-of-mouth communication, or sharing intention as secondary outcomes following consumption, while rarely incorporating them into an integrated framework of value creation. However, in an era in which social media is deeply embedded within tourism consumption, dissemination behavior is no longer merely a form of post-experience expression; rather, it has increasingly become a crucial mechanism for amplifying commercial value. Through short videos, photo-based "check-ins," and content production, tourists generate "grass-planting" effects that not only influence potential tourists' visitation decisions, but also inversely reinforce destination popularity and commercial attractiveness. If the feedback effects of dissemination and diffusion are ignored, it becomes difficult to fully explain why immersive cultural tourism projects are capable of continuously generating traffic concentration and commercial value spillover.

Based on the above research gaps, this study takes immersive cultural districts as the research context and selects visitors to Datang Everbright City as the primary interview subjects. Using the grounded theory approach, the study conducts open coding, axial coding, and selective coding of interview materials. Through continuous comparison and category integration, it constructs a mechanism model of "Cultural experience—Emotional and identity mechanisms—Consumption conversion—Generation of commercial value."

The study not only focuses on tourists' consumption behavior itself, but also emphasizes the emotional, identity-related, and social dissemination logics underlying such behavior. Furthermore, it reveals the feedback pathways through which dissemination and diffusion contribute to the generation of commercial value. In doing so, the research provides a more comprehensive process-oriented explanatory framework for understanding experience transformation and value formation within immersive cultural tourism contexts.

3. Research design

3.1. Case selection

This study selects Datang Everbright City as the core case and takes tourists who visited the district, participated in cultural experiences, and engaged in actual consumption activities as the primary interview subjects. This selection is mainly based on the following three considerations.

(1) Immersive cultural districts are increasingly becoming important carriers of cultural tourism consumption and representative settings for observing how cultural experiences are transformed into consumption behavior. Driven by the experience economy and the integration of culture and tourism, tourists' travel demands have gradually shifted from "viewing landscapes and visiting attractions" toward "entering scenes and pursuing experiences." Compared with traditional sightseeing models, tourists now pay greater attention to whether the atmosphere is immersive, whether interactions provide a sense of participation, and whether experiences can generate emotional resonance. The popularity of social media has further amplified these demands, as people are more willing to obtain emotional value within spaces characterized by immersion and cultural recognizability, while simultaneously completing self-expression through online sharing. Through the integrated design of Tang Dynasty cultural settings, immersive performances, interactive parades, and nighttime lighting spaces, Datang Everbright City has formed a comprehensive consumption environment that is "experiential, shareable, and consumable." Therefore, selecting tourists as research subjects helps the study approach real situational contexts and capture the complete process from experiential perception to consumption decision-making.

(2) Datang Everbright City features concentrated cultural symbols, strong situational immersion, and a complete consumption chain. Centered on the theme of the prosperous Tang Dynasty culture, the district constructs a powerful sense of visual impact and situational immersion through Tang-style architectural complexes, lighting performances, interactive shows, and parade activities. During their visits, tourists do not merely remain spectators, but instead deeply enter the scene through activities such as Hanfu experiences, "check-in" photography, interactive participation, and narrative-style exploration. In this process, consumption is often driven not by purely functional needs, but rather by atmosphere, emotional resonance, and social expression. For example, tourists may rent Hanfu to achieve a stronger sense of immersion, purchase cultural and creative products to "take away" the experience, or select paid activities to obtain greater ritualistic feelings or more visually appealing photos and videos, which are subsequently shared on platforms such as short-video applications and social media feeds. This demonstrates that Datang Everbright City is not merely a tourism space, but also a consumption setting in which emotional experiences are continuously stimulated and cultural identification is constantly reinforced.

(3) The continuous popularity of Datang Everbright City in recent years provides a representative case for analyzing how cultural experiences generate commercial value. With the rise of "Guochao" culture and the nighttime economy, the district has gradually evolved from a traditional tourism street into a cultural consumption destination possessing urban branding attributes. A large number of tourists use "check-in" activities as entry points, develop impulses to share their experiences during participation, and expand the destination's influence through content dissemination on social media platforms, thereby generating additional visitation and consumption. In this process, tourists are not only recipients of cultural experiences, but also, to some extent, participants in content dissemination and co-creators of commercial value. Conducting interviews from the perspective of tourists enables a deeper understanding of why they are willing to share, what kinds of content they choose to share, and how sharing behaviors in turn influence their consumption choices, thereby more comprehensively revealing the underlying mechanism through which cultural experiences are transformed into commercial value.

3.2. Interview protocol design

This study adopts a combination of semi-structured interviews and grounded theory coding to exploratorily construct a mechanism framework of "Cultural experience—Emotional and identity mechanisms—Consumption conversion—Generation of commercial value" within immersive cultural tourism contexts. The research focuses on tourists' continuous behavioral processes within the cultural

district, including experiential triggers, emotional changes, interactive participation, consumption decision-making, and dissemination through sharing behaviors. As this process is highly context-dependent and characterized by significant individual differences, it is difficult to fully capture its formation logic solely through structured measurement scales. Semi-structured interviews not only ensure that discussions remain centered on the research themes, but also allow respondents to present authentic details and key situational experiences through narrative expression, thereby providing more substantial empirical materials for mechanism extraction.

Data analysis follows the procedures of grounded theory, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Through continuous comparison and category integration, core categories and their relational framework are gradually developed, while theoretical convergence is achieved through repeated examination and refinement.

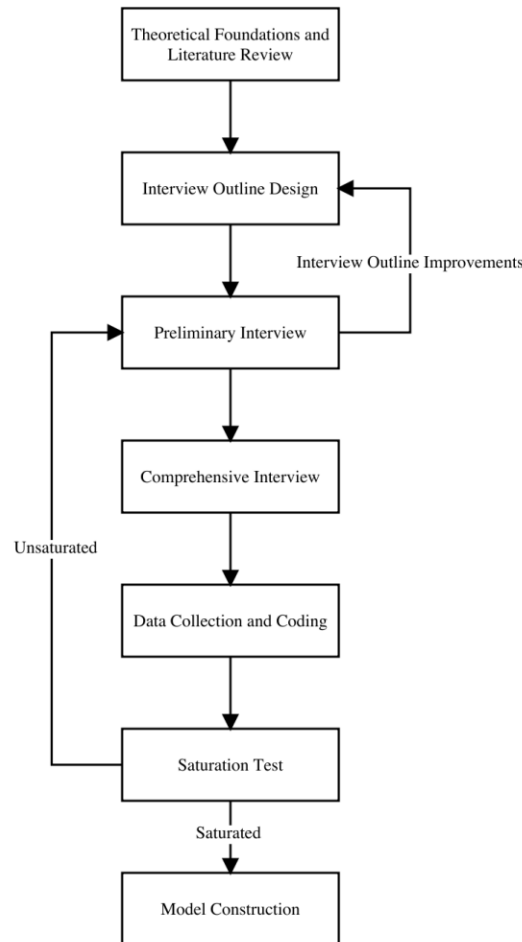


Figure 1. Research process.

To more comprehensively present the transformation process through which tourists in Datang Everbright City move from experience to consumption and subsequently to dissemination, this study designs the interview protocol around three major themes: experiential triggers and perception processes, emotional and identity mechanisms, and the transformation pathways of consumption and dissemination. During the interview process, the protocol is not applied mechanically; rather, flexible follow-up questions are conducted according to differences in respondents' visitation frequency, travel patterns, and consumption levels. This approach maintains comparability while preserving the naturalness of narratives and the authenticity of situational contexts as much as possible.

(1) Experiential triggers and perception processes: This section primarily aims to identify which culturalelements attract tourists and generate a sense of immersion after they enter the district. It first examines tourists' basic characteristics and travel features, such as age, place of origin, visitation frequency, and travel companions, while also exploring their visitation motivations and information sources.

Subsequently, discussions focus on tourists' touring routes and key experiential scenes, emphasizing the roles played by Tang Dynasty cultural symbols, spatial atmosphere, lighting performances, and interactive parades in shaping their experiences. Further inquiries examine how tourists evaluate the authenticity of cultural presentations, the immersiveness of atmospheric construction, and the participatory quality of interactive activities, thereby reconstructing the formation process of cultural experiences.

(2) Emotional and identity mechanisms: This section mainly explains how experiences are transformed into consumption intentions and behavioral tendencies. Discussions center on tourists' emotional changes during the touring process, focusing on the situational conditions under which emotions such as surprise, excitement, emotional resonance, and relaxation are stimulated and reinforced. Further inquiries explore whether these emotions generate cultural resonance, local impressions, or needs for identity expression. The interviews also pay attention to tourists' self-perceptions and role-positioning changes during activities such as Hanfu experiences, accompanying photography, "check-in" activities, and interactive participation, as well as the influence of companion interactions on emotional involvement and decision-making formation. This helps reveal the specific pathway from emotional engagement to identity construction.

(3) Transformation pathways of consumption and dissemination: This section primarily traces the process from "wanting to purchase" to "actually purchasing," as well as the transition from "experience" to "diffusion." It first examines tourists' consumption items and consumption levels, while further investigating the triggering points and evaluative criteria underlying consumption behaviors, particularly the situational factors behind spontaneous purchasing decisions. In addition, the interviews incorporate modules concerning social media sharing and word-of-mouth dissemination, discussing whether and how tourists publish content, their primary motivations and target audiences for sharing, and whether sharing behaviors inversely influence their consumption choices. This approach further illustrates the mechanisms through which commercial value is generated and amplified within immersive cultural tourism settings.

3.3. Selection of interview participants

This study primarily adopts an offline interview approach to obtain research samples. During the interview process, the research purpose and scope of use were clearly explained to participants, emphasizing that the study was conducted solely for academic analysis, that all responses would remain anonymous, and that no personally identifiable information would be collected. This approach was intended to reduce respondents' concerns and enhance their willingness to participate. To ensure sample validity, two tourists were selected for pilot interviews prior to the formal interview stage. The pilot interviews were used to examine whether the wording of the interview questions was sufficiently clear, whether the logical flow of the questions was coherent, and whether respondents could naturally elaborate on their experiences under the guidance of the interview prompts. Based on the feedback obtained from the pilot interviews, adjustments were made to the wording and sequence of several questions. Specifically, abstract or highly academic expressions were reformulated into more conversational language, and the interview structure was optimized so that discussions would begin with concrete experiences before gradually transitioning toward opinions and evaluations. This enabled respondents to express their authentic perspectives more naturally in their own language, thereby improving the operability and informational quality of the formal interviews.

During the formal interview stage, the research team first used screening questions to ensure that respondents were tourists who had recently visited the destination and had participated in experiential activities or engaged in consumption behaviors. Considering the high mobility of tourist groups, their relatively short duration of stay, and the dispersed nature of the sample, each interview lasted approximately 20–35 minutes. With the respondents' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, and transcription and preliminary analysis were completed on the same day as the interview. Representative narrative excerpts and key factual information were promptly extracted in order to preserve situational contexts and experiential details as comprehensively as possible. To facilitate data management and subsequent referencing, the researchers established metadata records for each interview, documenting information such as interview time, interview location, and respondents' basic characteristics, thereby enhancing the traceability of the research process and the transparency of the methodology. The statistical

results regarding the basic characteristics of the respondents are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Characteristics of interview participants.

ID	Gender	Age	Interview Duration	Visit Frequency	Travel Mode	Consumption Level
A1	Female	26	30 minutes	First visit	Couple	Light consumption
A2	Male	45	35 minutes	First visit	With relatives/friends	Sightseeing only
A3	Male	24	30 minutes	Second visit	Couple	Light consumption
A4	Female	47	30 minutes	Multiple visits	With relatives/friends	Sightseeing only
A5	Female	64	30 minutes	Second visit	With relatives/friends	Sightseeing only
A6	Female	22	25 minutes	Second visit	With relatives/friends	Deep consumption
A7	Male	41	25 minutes	Multiple visits	With relatives/friends	Deep consumption
A8	Male	42	20 minutes	First visit	With relatives/friends	Sightseeing only
A9	Female	40	25 minutes	Multiple visits	With relatives/friends	Light consumption
A10	Female	25	30 minutes	First visit	Couple	Light consumption
A11	Male	52	25 minutes	Second visit	With relatives/friends	Sightseeing only
A12	Male	21	30 minutes	First visit	Solo travel	Deep consumption
A13	Female	32	30 minutes	Second visit	With relatives/friends	Deep consumption
A14	Female	28	25 minutes	Second visit	With relatives/friends	Light consumption
A15	Male	21	20 minutes	First visit	Couple	Deep consumption
A16	Female	22	35 minutes	Multiple visits	Couple	Deep consumption
A17	Male	29	35 minutes	Multiple visits	Solo travel	Light consumption
A18	Female	49	20 minutes	First visit	With relatives/friends	Sightseeing only
A19	Male	45	30 minutes	Second visit	With relatives/friends	Light consumption
A20	Male	29	25 minutes	Multiple visits	Solo travel	Deep consumption

As shown in **Table 1**, this study completed semi-structured in-depth interviews with a total of 20 tourists. All respondents were visitors to Datang Everbright City who had participated in cultural experiences and had either engaged in on-site consumption behaviors or encountered consumption decision-making situations during their visits. The gender distribution of the sample was relatively balanced, consisting of 10 male and 10 female participants. The respondents ranged in age from 20 to 65 years old, with young and middle-aged groups forming the majority, while also including a certain proportion of middle-aged and elderly tourists. This composition facilitates the examination of differences in nighttime tourism experiences and consumption choices across gender and age groups.

In terms of visitation frequency, the sample covered three categories: first-time visitors, second-time visitors, and repeat visitors, with 7, 7, and 6 participants respectively. This distribution contributes to comparing the distinct effects of "novelty-driven" experiences among first-time visitors and "memory-continuation-driven" experiences among repeat visitors in terms of experiential evaluation and consumption transformation. Regarding travel patterns, most respondents traveled with relatives or friends (12 participants), while the sample also included couples traveling together (5 participants) and solo travelers (3 participants), which is consistent with the social-oriented travel characteristics commonly observed in nighttime cultural districts.

With respect to consumption levels, the sample included 7 participants engaged in light consumption, 7 participants engaged in deep consumption, and 6 participants who mainly engaged in sightseeing activities without substantial consumption. The relatively balanced distribution of these categories provides a foundation for further revealing the underlying mechanism through which cultural experiences are transformed into commercial value.

4. Coding process

4.1. Open coding

During the open coding stage, the researchers conducted sentence-by-sentence and paragraph-by-paragraph analyses of the transcribed texts from the 20 interviews, using "meaning units" as the smallest units of analysis to extract keywords and core meanings^[37]. Throughout the coding process, efforts were made to preserve tourists' everyday expressions as much as possible, such as "atmosphere," "photogenic," "sense of immersion," and "whether it feels worthwhile," while further conceptual refinement was conducted on this basis. Expressions with similar meanings were continuously compared, merged, revised,

and recalibrated through the constant comparative method in order to reduce repetitive naming and semantic overlap. After multiple rounds of iterative analysis, the study developed relatively stable initial concepts, which were subsequently aggregated into initial categories, thereby providing the foundation for subsequent axial coding and category integration. Ultimately, the study identified 30 initial concepts, which were further consolidated into 12 categories.

Table 2. Open coding.

Category	Conceptualization	Original Interview Excerpt
Cultural Symbol Perception	Recognition of Tang Dynasty symbols	"As soon as I entered, I could immediately tell it was Tang-style; the architecture and decorations really had that atmosphere."
	Cultural narrative association	"While walking around, I naturally associated it with Chang'an in TV dramas, and vivid images automatically came to mind."
	Attraction of traditional elements	"Those light signs, installations, and costume details were really eye-catching and made me want to stop and look."
Spatial Atmosphere Construction	Lighting atmosphere stimulation	"Once the lights came on, the whole street felt completely different; the atmosphere instantly reached its peak."
	Influence of lively crowds	"The large crowd actually made it feel better. Seeing everyone strolling around created a particularly lively atmosphere."
	Immersion in nighttime touring rhythm	"The pace of walking around at night felt very comfortable, and the more I walked, the more I wanted to continue exploring."
Immersion and Role-Engagement Experience	Sense of time travel / temporal displacement	"For a moment, I genuinely felt as if I had returned to ancient times; it did not feel like an ordinary commercial street."
	Scene immersion	"It did not feel like I was merely visiting a tourist attraction; it felt as though I had been placed directly into the scene itself."
	Situational continuity	"The entire route felt very coherent, and there were no moments that suddenly broke the immersion."
Interactive Participation Experience	Attraction of parade interaction	"As soon as the parade started, I followed along, and the more I followed, the more excited I became."
	Transformation from passive to active participation	"At first I was just watching, but once the performers interacted with me, I could not help participating."
	Participation enhancing length of stay	"With interactive activities, I was more willing to stop and stay; otherwise, I probably would have walked past quickly."
Aesthetic and Photogenic Needs	Motivation for photogenic content	"I mainly wanted to take good-looking photos, and this place is definitely very photogenic."
	Searching for 'check-in' spots	"Before coming, I had already searched for recommendations because I wanted to photograph all the must-visit spots."
	Dependence on accompanying photography	"I am not very good at taking photos myself, so I thought hiring a photographer would be more convenient and produce more stable results."
Emotional Arousal and Fluctuation	Surprise and excitement	"My first reaction was surprise; the real scene was much more impressive than what I had seen online."
	Emotional touch / empathy	"Some performances were genuinely moving, and they really stirred my emotions."
	Relaxation and stress relief	"I treated it as a way to relax. Walking around made me feel much more relaxed and reduced my stress."
Cultural Resonance and Sense of Meaning	Activation of historical imagination	"I started imagining what ancient Chang'an looked like, and history suddenly felt much closer."
	Sense of cultural pride	"When this kind of traditional Chinese-style setting is done well, it makes me feel quite proud."
	Learning-oriented experience	"While walking around, I also learned some things, so it was not just simple shopping or sightseeing."
Identity Expression and Sense of Ritual	Hanfu enhancing immersion	"After wearing Hanfu, the whole experience felt completely different; it was much easier to 'enter the role.'"
	Completion of ritualistic feeling	"Since I was already here, I felt I should make the experience complete; otherwise, it would feel as though something was missing."
	Need for self-presentation	"Posting photos online is also a way of recording the experience, and I want others to know that I came here."

Table 2. (Continued)

Category	Conceptualization	Original Interview Excerpt
Social Influence and Companion Effects	Companion-driven consumption	"My friend suggested renting a costume, so I followed along; otherwise, I would not look good in the photos either."
	Demonstration effect of others	"Seeing other people dressed beautifully made me want to try it as well."
	Constraints of group decision-making	"Since there were many people in our group, we discussed things together, so we did not necessarily participate in every activity."
Consumption Trigger Points	Emotional continuation promoting purchases	"After the performance ended, the emotions were still lingering, so I wanted to buy a cultural souvenir as a keepsake."
Consumption Value Judgment	Evaluation of 'whether it is worth it'	"The products were not cheap, but I felt the experience justified the price, so I could accept it."
Sharing, Dissemination, and Re-diffusion	Influencing and attracting others	"After I posted online, people immediately asked me for travel tips, and it felt as though they were also influenced and attracted by it."

4.2. Axial coding

Based on the results of the open coding stage, the researchers further integrated and reorganized the previously identified categories. By examining the causal clues and process chains repeatedly emerging from different respondents' narratives, the study identified and refined the conditional, interactive, and consequential relationships among categories. Ultimately, the research materials generated during the open coding stage were consolidated into five core dimensions.

Table 3. Axial coding.

Main Category	Subcategory	Description
Cultural Scene Stimuli	Cultural Symbol Perception	The external situations and cultural atmosphere first perceived by tourists after entering the district, serving as the starting point of the experiential process.
	Spatial Atmosphere Construction	
Formation of Immersive Experience	Immersion and Role-Engagement Experience	The process through which tourists shift from "watching" to "entering the scene."
	Interactive Participation Experience	
Emotional and Identity Mechanisms	Emotional Arousal and Fluctuation	The process of emotional change and meaning construction experienced by tourists during participation.
	Cultural Resonance and Sense of Meaning	
	Identity Expression and Sense of Ritual	
	Social Influence and Companion Effects	
Consumption Transformation Process	Consumption Trigger Points	The process through which tourists' consumption motivations are stimulated, consumption decisions are formed, and specific consumption behaviors and consumption levels ultimately emerge.
	Consumption Value Judgment	
Behavioral Outcomes and Value Spillover	Aesthetic and Photogenic Needs	The process through which tourists amplify destination popularity and commercial value through sharing and dissemination behaviors.
	Sharing, Dissemination, and Re-diffusion	

4.3. Selective coding

Based on the axial coding stage, the researchers further conducted selective coding to comprehensively integrate the relationships among the major categories and to extract the core category capable of synthesizing the research findings^[38]. The selective coding stage primarily focused on the central question of "how tourists' consumption behavior is formed and transformed into commercial value within immersive cultural tourism contexts." Through repeated comparisons of narrative logics, behavioral pathways, and category relationships across different interview materials, the five major categories identified during axial coding were further integrated and theoretically abstracted.

Table 4. Selective coding.

Hierarchical Level	Typical Relational Structure	Structural Meaning
Situational Level	Cultural Scene Stimuli → Formation of Immersive Experience	External cultural cues and atmospheric settings "draw tourists into the scene," and are transformed into immersive experiences through interaction and spatial narratives.
Situational Level → Mechanism Level	Formation of Immersive Experience → Emotional and Identity Mechanisms	The sense of "presence" triggers emotional responses and meaning construction, while social situations further reinforce identity and self-expression needs.
Mechanism Level	Emotional and Identity Mechanisms → Consumption Transformation Process	Consumption motivations are strengthened and subsequently enter evaluations such as "whether it is worth it" under specific triggering conditions, ultimately forming consumption decisions.
Mechanism Level → Outcome Level	Consumption Transformation Process → Behavioral Outcomes and Value Spillover	Decisions are translated into actual consumption behaviors, which further spill over into dissemination and renewed attraction, thereby amplifying commercial value.
Feedback Loop	Behavioral Outcomes and Value Spillover → Cultural Scene Stimuli	The cycle of "Experience—Consumption—Dissemination—Re-attraction" continuously strengthens front-end stimuli and promotes the cyclical growth of commercial value.

As shown in the table above, at the situational level, cultural scene stimuli encourage tourists to enter and remain within the destination through external cues such as cultural symbols and spatial atmosphere. Under the influence of interactive performances and spatial narratives, these stimuli are further transformed into immersive experiences, thereby realizing the experiential transition from "watching" to "entering." Secondly, the transformation from the situational level to the mechanism level indicates that the sense of presence and participation generated by immersive experiences stimulates tourists' emotional responses and meaning construction. Within social contexts characterized by companion interaction and observational influences from others, these experiences further strengthen tourists' needs for cultural identification and identity expression.

At the mechanism level, emotional and identity mechanisms continuously reinforce consumption motivations by enhancing the emotional value and symbolic meaning of experiences. Under the influence of specific triggering factors such as emotional continuation, commemorative needs, and the desire for photogenic content, tourists subsequently enter a process of value evaluation, eventually forming executable consumption decisions. The pathway from the mechanism level to the outcome level demonstrates that consumption decisions are further translated into concrete consumption behaviors, while social media sharing, word-of-mouth dissemination, and content diffusion generate spillover effects that attract additional visitors and amplify commercial value. Together, these relational structures constitute a continuous chain of "Cultural experience—Emotional and identity mechanisms—Consumption conversion—Generation of commercial value" within immersive cultural tourism contexts.

4.4. Theoretical saturation test

Theoretical saturation testing is used to determine whether the collected research materials sufficiently support the construction of the theoretical framework. During the continuous process of data collection and analysis, when no new concepts or categories emerge, the theoretical structure is generally considered relatively complete, and the necessity for further supplementary data is substantially reduced, indicating that the study has reached the saturation stage^[39]. After completing the stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, this study conducted additional interviews with three respondents and organized the interview contents into structured texts for comparative analysis. The results indicated that no new concepts or categories emerged, suggesting that the current coding results had reached theoretical saturation.

5. Research conclusions, contributions, and limitations

5.1. Research conclusions

Based on the grounded theory analysis of interview materials collected from visitors to Datang Everbright City, this study constructs a mechanism model of "Cultural experience—Emotional and identity mechanisms—Consumption conversion—Generation of commercial value" within immersive

cultural tourism contexts. The findings indicate that tourists' consumption behavior is not driven solely by functional needs, but rather emerges as a dynamic process gradually formed through the joint influence of cultural scene stimuli and immersive experiences. The main conclusions are as follows:

(1) At the situational level, cultural symbol perception and spatial atmosphere construction constitute the external context in which experiences occur. Through process mechanisms such as immersion, role engagement, and interactive participation, tourists gradually transform from simple "spectators" into "participants" characterized by senses of presence and engagement.

(2) In the transformation from the situational level to the mechanism level, emotional arousal, cultural resonance, identity expression, and social influence jointly constitute the core mediating mechanisms underlying the formation of consumption behavior. These mechanisms not only strengthen tourists' perceptions of the emotional value and symbolic meaning of experiences, but also promote the transition from experiential perception to the reinforcement of consumption motivation.

(3) At the mechanism level, consumption-triggering factors such as emotional continuation, commemorative meaning, photogenic demands, and companion influence, combined with value evaluations involving "whether it is worth it," price tolerance, and experiential cost-effectiveness, collectively contribute to the formation of consumption decisions. These decisions are subsequently manifested in different types and levels of consumption behavior.

(4) In the transformation from the mechanism level to the outcome level, aesthetic and photogenic demands further promote deep consumption behaviors such as Hanfu rental, accompanying photography services, and paid experiential activities. Meanwhile, social media sharing, word-of-mouth dissemination, and content production continuously reinforce the diffusion effect of "Interest cultivation–Revisitation–Reconsumption," extending commercial value from on-site consumption toward dissemination spillovers and renewed attraction. Ultimately, this process forms a cyclical mechanism of "Experience—Consumption—Dissemination—Re-attraction."

5.2. Research contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study are mainly reflected in the following three aspects.

First, adopting grounded theory as the primary methodology, this study focuses on immersive cultural districts as an emerging cultural tourism context and reveals the underlying mechanism through which cultural experiences are transformed into commercial value from a dynamic process perspective. In doing so, it enriches the theoretical explanation of the "experience–consumption–dissemination" chain within cultural tourism consumption research.

Second, the study situates tourist consumption behavior within a dual framework of "emotion–identity" mechanisms, emphasizing the critical roles of emotional arousal, cultural meaning construction, identity expression, and social influence in the formation of consumption behavior. This approach transcends the traditional explanatory logic of cultural tourism research centered primarily on functional needs, further extending the discussion to dimensions such as emotional consumption, identity consumption, and situational consumption.

Third, based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, the study integrates category relationships through a three-level structure consisting of the "situational level–mechanism level–outcome level," while also incorporating a feedback loop of dissemination and diffusion. The findings reveal that commercial value does not remain confined to on-site consumption, but is continuously accumulated and amplified through the cyclical process of "Experience—Consumption—Dissemination—Re-attraction." This provides a new theoretical perspective and analytical framework for understanding value creation and diffusion mechanisms within immersive cultural tourism settings.

5.3. Research limitations

Although this study provides a relatively systematic explanation of immersive cultural tourism consumption mechanisms from a process-oriented perspective, several limitations remain.

First, this study conducts a qualitative investigation centered on Datang Everbright City as the core case, and therefore the findings exhibit strong context-dependent characteristics. Future studies may further introduce comparative multi-case research involving different types of immersive cultural tourism settings,

such as urban nighttime tourism districts, immersive performance projects, and themed historical-cultural blocks, in order to test the applicability and boundary conditions of the proposed model across different cultural types and business models.

Second, the present study mainly constructs its theoretical model based on interview materials and grounded theory coding, without quantitatively examining the relationships among pathways or the strength of effects between variables. Future research may develop measurement scales based on the categories identified in this study and further verify and expand the model through structural equation modeling, experimental research, or mixed-method approaches.

Finally, significant differences may exist among different tourist groups in terms of consumption motivations and behavioral pathways. For example, local tourists and non-local tourists, first-time visitors and repeat visitors, as well as solo travelers and group travelers may differ substantially in their experiential focuses and consumption-triggering mechanisms. Future studies may therefore pay greater attention to the differentiated mechanisms and key triggering conditions associated with various tourist types, thereby enhancing both the explanatory depth and practical applicability of the model.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, B.J. and Z.S.; methodology, B.J.; software, B.J.; validation, B.J. and Z.S.; formal analysis, B.J.; investigation, B.J.; resources, B.J.; data curation, B.J. and Z.S.; writing—original draft preparation, B.J. and Z.S.; writing—review and editing, B.J. and Z.S.; visualization, Z.S.; supervision, Z.S.; project administration, B.J. and Z.S.; funding acquisition, B.J. and Z.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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