

A study on the construction of the ‘tourist gaze’ and experience value in lighthouse tourism for community-based tourism

Li Gan Qi (Graduate School of Hokkai School of Commerce, China)

INTRODUCTION

Japan’s coastal communities face depopulation and industrial restructuring, leading to a widening distance between everyday life and the sea in both psychological and economic terms. Tourism is expected to reconnect regions with external actors and contribute to sustainable community formation, yet evaluation centered on visitor numbers and tourism consumption overlooks how experiences create connections and sustained engagement.

Lighthouses, once understood as public navigational infrastructure, are now being reassessed as media linking seascapes, heritage, architecture, maritime culture, and local memory. Lighthouse tourism, however, remains within the domain of visual consumption, such as spectacular scenery, photo-based check-ins, and first-sunrise viewing. Previous studies and tourism practices have tended to focus on heritage value, landscape appreciation, or promotional use, while insufficient attention has been paid to how lighthouse-related experiences generate sustained relationships between visitors and local communities.

This study analyzes Inubosaki Lighthouse and the Sea and Lighthouse Project’s New Lighthouse Utilization Model Program (NLUMP) to examine how lighthouse tourism can evolve from visual consumption toward narrative experience, learning, participation, and relationship formation. The purpose of this study is to clarify the relationship between the tourist gaze and experiential value in lighthouse tourism, and to reveal its influence on the formation of sustainable relationships with local communities.

The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: In the demonstration projects, through what “gaze” frameworks are lighthouses framed and presented, and which experiential value dimensions are emphasized?

RQ2: How can projects be categorized based on combinations of gaze type and experiential value structure, and how do types differ in modes and degrees of community involvement?

RQ3: What experience-design strategies and governance conditions enable co-creation and sustained relationship-building consistent with community-based tourism (CBT)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study integrates three core theoretical frameworks. First, John Urry’s (1990) “tourist gaze” theory is employed as the foundation for analyzing representations in lighthouse tourism. The tourist gaze is defined here as a socially constructed cognitive framework that orients what is to be looked at and how it should be seen. Based on a three-stage procedure—(1) re-sorting Urry’s (1990; 2011) multiple tourist gazes, (2) a systematic review of previous lighthouse tourism, and (3) a preliminary text analysis of 51 NLUMP project descriptions—the gaze is reorganized into five categories: landscape gaze, narrative gaze, learning gaze, experiential gaze, and relational gaze. However, while gaze theory excels at representation analysis, it cannot fully explain the process through which tourist experiences are transformed into sustained relationships or the nature of community actors’ involvement.

To address this limitation, experiential value theory is introduced. Drawing on Pine & Gilmore’s (1999) experience economy model and Nanchi’s (2021) multidimensional experiential value model for pilgrimage tourism, and considering the specificity of lighthouse tourism (active infrastructure, maritime culture, closeness to local life), experiential value is operationalized into six dimensions: ① extraordinary value, ② authenticity value, ③ aesthetic and entertainment value, ④ educational value,

⑤ economic value, and ⑥ social and relational value. The sixth dimension, in particular, is the core value dimension capturing the relationship formation between visitors and the community.

Third, to examine how these values connect to community relationship building, CBT and value co-creation perspectives are adopted. CBT is a framework in which the local community exercises agency in tourism planning and management and equitably distributes the accruing benefits (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009); this governance structure enables an institutional analysis of the conditions for generating relational value (Okazaki, 2008). Additionally, the three narrative axes proposed in “Sea and Lighthouse Studies”—global narratives (sea routes, modernization networks), local narratives (local livelihoods, disaster memories), and geo narratives (topography, geology, natural environment)—serve as reference points for analyzing narrative resources in experience design.

METHOD

This study adopts a two-tiered case design. The primary case is Inubosaki Lighthouse, where gaze and experiential value formation is examined in a setting prone to concentrated symbolic landscapes and ritual visits. The secondary object comprises 51 NLUMP projects adopted between FY2022 and FY2025. These projects are compared in terms of experience design, narrative editing, and collaboration structures.

Data consist of four types: (1) project documents such as application guidelines, outcome reports, web articles, and event records, to grasp the design intentions of implementing organizations and governments (corresponding to RQ1 and RQ2); (2) tourism media, including the travel magazine *Tabi* (1927–1999) and the guidebook *Rurubu Chiba Boso* (editions from 1991 to 2025), are used to longitudinally analyze how the representation of lighthouse tourism has been historically constructed and transformed. These media were selected because they provide evidence of how Inubosaki Lighthouse and coastal destinations in Chiba have been represented to tourists across different periods; (3) publicly available Facebook posts from the past ten years are analyzed to capture tourists’ actual experiences and value perceptions independently of promotional content. Personally identifiable information is anonymized or excluded in accordance with research ethics; and (4) semi-structured interviews were conducted with local governments, implementing organizations, and community stakeholders to extract the actual status of community engagement and governance conditions. These interviews are central to answering RQ3.

The analysis adopts a three-layer structure of representation, practice, and institution. For representation analysis, coding of gaze types and experiential value dimensions is conducted on documents, tourism media, and SNS data. For practice analysis, cross-project comparison evaluates experience design elements and the depth of community engagement. For institutional analysis, governance conditions are extracted from interviews and typological comparison. A unified codebook specifying judgment criteria for the five gaze types and six experiential value dimensions is used. Double coding is performed to improve reliability, and the coding procedure, analytical unit, and agreement rate will be reported in the final paper.

FINDINGS

This study hypothesizes a cyclical structure in which gaze, experiential value, and community engagement are not unilaterally determined but are reorganized as community engagement intensifies. Based on preliminary analyses, the experience designs of the model projects can be classified into the following four types:

- Type A: Landscape and Ritual-Centric Type – Visual consumption is dominant; community engagement is passive. Stays are short and focused on photography. Economic and social benefits may not adequately permeate the local community.

- Type B: Narrative Editing and Learning Connection Type – Narrative and learning elements strengthen educational and authenticity values. Local residents are partially involved through roles such as guiding. Tourists’ understanding deepens, creating opportunities for extended stay and repeat visits.

· Type C: Exploration and Physical Engagement Type – Access difficulties and topographical conditions are leveraged as resources, enhancing extraordinary value and a sense of achievement through physical participation. The community may be partially involved in safety management. Diversification of participation motives is expected.

· Type D: Co-creation and Relational Value Type – Local residents, fishers, businesses, and researchers engage from the planning stage. Through co-management, workshops, and co-editing of local resources, social value and authenticity value are reinforced. Tourists are positioned not as mere observers but as actors who participate in the community's values and challenges, promoting sustained relationship formation.

The analysis using this typology reveals that as educational value and relational value are strengthened, the tourist–community relationship tends to deepen in a sustained manner.

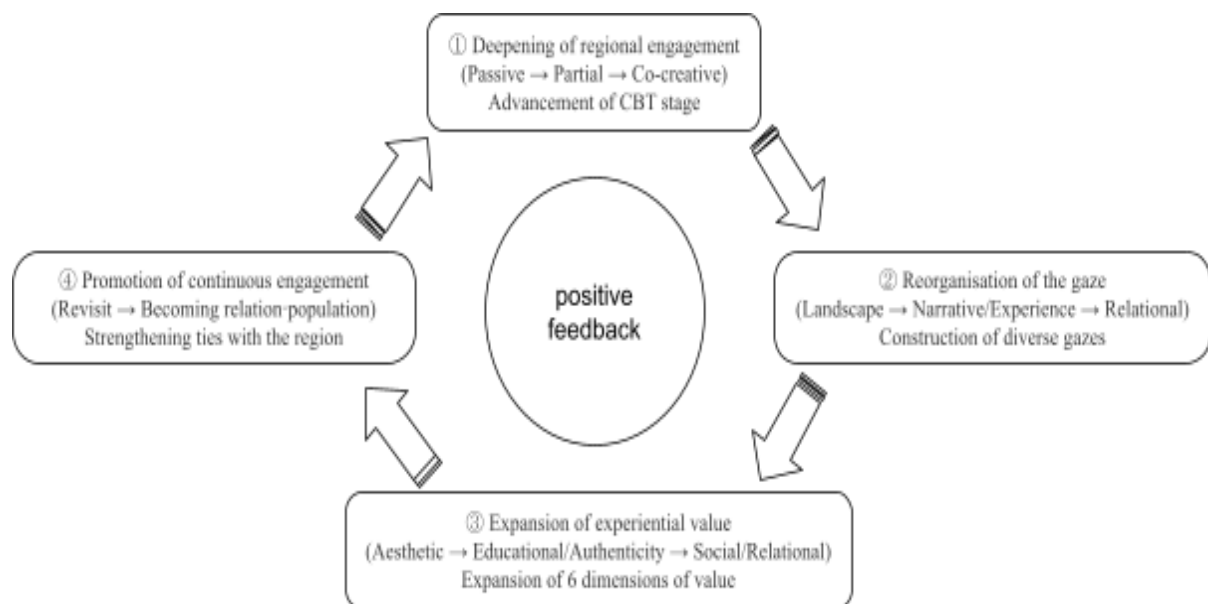


Figure 1. Positive feedback loop of regional engagement, gaze reorganisation, and experiential value

IMPLICATIONS

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in redefining the tourist gaze from a visually-centered representation to a generator of experiential value and proposing a cyclical model mediated by community engagement. By positioning relational experiential value as an independent dimension, the study bridges tourism experience and CBT research, offering a perspective that frames lighthouse tourism as a design issue for community relationships.

This study demonstrates the conditions for shifting lighthouse tourism from visual consumption toward co-creation of relational value and highlights the importance of community-driven, sustainable tourism development. Lighthouses can be positioned not merely as scenic resources but as cultural infrastructure that reconnects the sea with people, and local communities with the outside world, through the reorganization of gazes and the co-creation of experiential value.

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