

Social Media Strategy and Capacity for Consumer Co-Creation among Destination Marketing Organizations

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Abstract

Applying the concept of absorptive capacity in the context of consumer integration for new product development in tourism, this study provided empirical support for the multidimensionality of capacity for consumer co-creation. Co-creation capacity consists of lower level capabilities, including explorative, transformative and exploitative capacity to turn consumer knowledge into consumer-centric products/services. It was identified that social media, in which consumers are increasingly participating in the knowledge exchange processes, is an important avenue for tourism organizations to nurture relationships with consumers that drive participation and integration. Social media strategy is shown to have a positive effect on capacity for co-creation, specifically the capability to process consumer knowledge into valuable assets. Finally, it was also identified that capacity for co-creation among tourism organizations has a positive impact on their performance.

Keywords: social media, consumer co-creation, tourism innovation.

1 Research Background

The importance of consumer involvement in the ideation and conception of new product development has been highly emphasized in business literature. Recently, the concept of co-creation surfaces and is embraced by business stakeholders and researchers. Co-creation is understood as a process in which value is co-created jointly by firm and consumers through consumer – company interactions (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2002, 2004). Engaging active, informed, connected, and empowered consumers in different stages of the value chain will manifest in the co-creation of value that generates and expands knowledge and strengthens firms' competitive advantage (Volberda, Foss and Lyles, 2010). The concept of co-creation dictates that, in order to create value, firms and organizations need to go beyond organizational boundaries into the value chain to foster collaborative exchange and integrate resources and skills to gain competitive advantage. According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2002), companies with a consumer-centric view regard consumers as an integral part of their system for value creation, in that consumers can influence the value generation process, compete with companies in value extraction and collaborate with companies in encounters. This means that consumers are not merely asked to contribute information regarding their needs and wants and satisfaction or dissatisfaction from consumption, but are also invited to contribute their creative insights and problem-solving skills to create,

conceptualize and experience new products/services (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

Tourism is arguably one of the greatest and fastest growing creators of experiences (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009). The unique characteristics of tourism, where experiences are produced and consumed simultaneously, make co-creation particularly significant in tourism. Binkhorst (2005) describes that the uniqueness in tourism lies in “no separation between supply and demand, company and customer, tourist and host...” (p.3). Rather, tourism should be seen as “a holistic network of stakeholders connected in experience environments in which everyone operates from different spatiotemporal contexts” (Binkhorst, 2005, p.3). Therefore, as tourism is seen as a performative action, co-creation between tourists and destinations in the process of experience production and consumption is unmistakable. In tourism literature, co-creation is interpreted from two related perspectives. *First*, co-creation tourism experience is seen as a simultaneous production and consumption or “service experience,” which is a mutual co-production of experience by tourists and tourism providers (Minkiewicz, Evans & Bridson, 2009). *Second*, co-creation in tourism is interpreted as the integration of tourists’ creativity and ideas in the process of new tourism product/service development and innovation. In this study, the latter perspective of co-creation is adopted.

To date, most studies on co-creation are conceptual propositions or case studies identifying motivators for consumer participation in new product development (e.g., Ostrom et al., 2010; Volberda, Foss and Lyles, 2010). Similarly, in the context of tourism, Lee (2012) investigated the factors that lead to visitors’ intention to co-create with tourism destinations by formally contributing their creative insights to develop new tourism products and/or to improve existing ones. However, research so far has yet to understand how well destinations can identify and extract tourists’ knowledge for tourism innovation. Therefore, in order to provide a foundation for successful co-creation in tourism, the first goal of this study is to conceptualize and measure destinations’ capacity for co-creation.

It is argued that a meaningful tourism experience happens through the various encounters among the different actors (i.e., the tourists, the tourism providers, the locals, etc.) in real and virtual environments, where interactions and exchanges of knowledge and services occur. Due to the development in information and communication technology (ICT), social media has been recognized as an integral part of the tourism environments, enabling encounters among tourists and other tourism stakeholders before, during, and after the trips. Tourists use social media to search and exchange information, opinion, and imagination with others (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social media allows destinations and tourism providers to connect directly with consumers and monitor consumer reviews (Hvass & Munar, 2012). Social media, thus, has dramatically transformed the social landscape of tourism and changed the meaning of “participation” (Lewis, Pea & Rosen, 2010). For tourism destinations, social media can serve as a playing field for “crowdsourcing” or “social content creation,” in which valuable information from tourists can be extracted. Recent research has documented different social media strategies among

tourism destinations (e.g., Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). However, it is important to identify whether their investment in social media actually results in a better capacity to extract knowledge from customers and turn it into product ideas. Consequently, the second goal of this study is to investigate the influence of social media strategies on destination's capacity for consumer co-creation.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media and Consumer Co-Creation

Since the introduction of the participative web (collectively known as Web 2.0) in the early 2000s, social media has become the new normal for consumers to search for and share information, opinion and experience with others. Today consumers planning a trip have ample opinion-rich resources such as virtual tourist communities and personal blogs to refer to in addition to information provided by destination marketing organizations (DMOs) or other tourism providers. After the trip, the participatory architecture of social media also allows tourists to post their experience and evaluation of specific destinations and brands to influence others, making social media a perfect ground to foster the spread of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Bronner & de Hoog, 2010; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2007). Hence, social media allows consumers to be an active player, to contribute to the provision of information, to transfer knowledge, and to spread social influence online.

The development of social media has critical consequences for the reputation and success of tourism organizations. Social media not only allows consumers to communicate directly with tourism providers, but also enables consumers to create a domain to converse about specific products and services outside of the media typically controlled by the providers. Therefore, it is understood that tourism organizations need to monitor social media (i.e., listening and responding to customers) and harvest consumer generated content online for their competitive advantages (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2007). Indeed, many tourism organizations use social media as a part of their marketing strategies by fostering consumer participation for promotion and product distribution (e.g., sponsoring blog posts, hiring professional bloggers, posting on discussion boards, etc.). Furthermore, consumer generated content offers potentials for market research, whereby tourism organizations can extract consumer characteristics, opinions, expertise, and sentiments towards tourism destinations and/or products (Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts, 2007). Hence, through its collaborative and participative platform, social media enables consumers to co-create value with tourism organizations.

In essence, social media offers consumer empowerment (Hoyer et al., 2010); it offers affordances for consumers to have a greater access to and participate in the process of value creation together with tourism organizations. Ultimately, social network interactions among consumers in social media may evolve into a networked process of innovation and social production (Potts et al., 2008). Harnessing the benefits and opportunities of social production, however, requires tourism destinations and

providers to adapt to and co-exist with social networks of consumers (Banks & Humphreys, 2008; Benkler, 2006). According to Banks and Humphreys (2008), these emerging co-creators cannot be managed and directed as employees; imposing control over them may risk losing their creative participation. In other words, tourism organizations need to develop new capabilities to work together with consumers and co-exist with consumer groups in social media. It is suggested that integrating social media strategies into the process of new product development may increase the capability of tourism organizations to co-create value with consumers. This suggests:

Hypothesis 1. *Social media strategy has a positive effect on organization's capacity for consumer co-creation.*

2.2 Consumer Participation and Co-Creation

In business literature, consumer participation and organizational design have been cited as the two critical dimensions for the realization of co-creation. The level of consumer integration in the tourism co-creation process depends on how tourism organizations empower tourists to play a role in new product development. In other words, for tourism organizations, the success for co-creation depends on their ability to identify, locate, and empower tourists with the right skills and characteristics, and turn them into collaborators. Service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) suggests that consumers can be seen as co-creators of value. To that end, tourism organizations need to integrate tourists into the value creation process. Indeed, Payne et al. (2008) suggest that consumers need to be strategically integrated at essentially every step along the product and/or service encounter. This provides a series of encounters through which tourism organizations can identify and extract information from tourists. The purposeful setup for learning from consumers not only changes consumers' role, but also alters the relationship between organizations and consumers and, ultimately, the product or service experience (Payne et al., 2008). Thus, from the dimension of consumer integration, the capacity for co-creation among tourism organizations is represented by their ability to identify creative consumers and facilitate them to become co-creators.

Another dimension of co-creation capacity is the capability to integrate the concept of co-creation in the culture of organizations. It is often related with dynamic capability, which is defined as firms' capability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competence to address changing environments (Benner, 2009), and absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990), which is the capability of the firms to value, assimilate, and realize new ideas from external sources. For tourism organizations, co-creation capacity is supported by their receptiveness of ideas from consumers and ability to transform these ideas into successful consumer-centric, co-created products and services. The goal of integrating consumer knowledge is the development of new products and services and/or to significantly improve current ones (through increased effectiveness or efficiency) to ultimately create a competitive advantage (Volberda, Foss and Lyles, 2010). This suggests:

Hypothesis 2. *The capacity for consumer co-creation has a positive effect on organization's performance.*

Absorptive capacity is understood as a higher level capacity that consists of several lower level capabilities (Volberda, Foss and Lyles, 2010). Dynamic capabilities literature formulated a process-based concept based on the knowledge flow during the different organizational learning processes. Zahra and George (2002) suggest four dimensions of absorptive capacity (referred to herein as “four-dimension model”): *acquisition* (i.e., the capability to recognize relevant external information), *assimilation* (i.e., organizational processes that allows analysing and understanding extracted information), *transformation* (i.e., ability to adapt extracted information into knowledge), and *exploitation* (i.e., ability to exploit external information for the benefit of organization). Acquisition and assimilation are labelled potential absorptive capacity (PAC); while transformation and exploitation are labelled realized absorptive capacity (RAC). Further, according to Zahra and George (2002), the ratio between PAC to RAC reflects the organizations’ efficiency in leveraging value from the acquired knowledge.

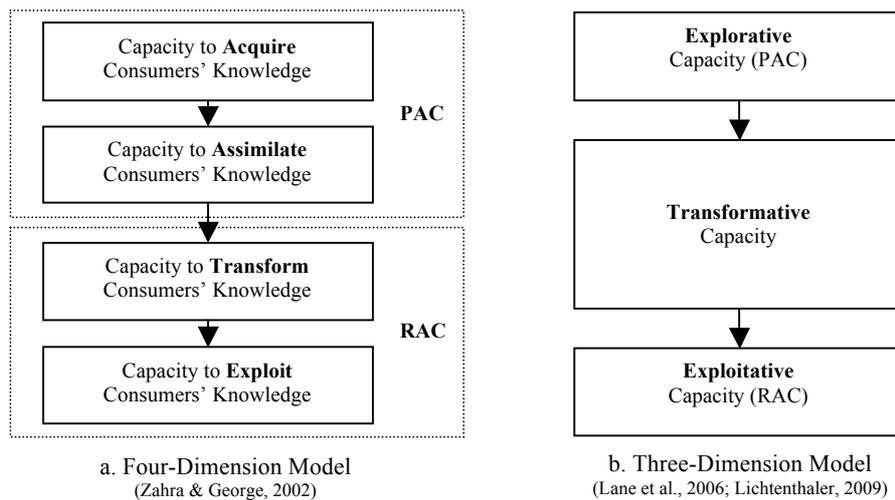


Fig. 1. Dimensions of Capacity for Consumer Co-creation

Another stream of literature suggests that PAC corresponds to explorative learning (i.e., knowledge acquisition) and RAC corresponds to exploitative learning (i.e., knowledge exploitation), suggesting transformative learning (i.e., knowledge transformation) as the bridge between PAC and RAC (Lichtenthaler, 2009) instead of an element within RAC (referred to herein as “three-dimension model”). In the case of consumer co-creation, PAC describes how organizations are capable of acquiring new ideas from consumers. That is to say, the capability to integrate consumers in the new product development process is part of PAC, whereby firms are able to acquire and extract consumers’ ideas through consumer – company interactions. RAC reflects

the ability of the organizations to leverage the absorbed knowledge into profit generation. In the context of co-creation, it is the capacity of tourism organizations to turn the co-created knowledge into co-created products/services. Transformation is seen as a social integration mechanism to bridge between PAC and RAC, implying that organizations that nurture information sharing and collaboration among employees will be more efficient in transforming knowledge into profit. The complementarity of the different dimensions of absorptive capacity has been emphasized recently, due to the increase in inter-organizational knowledge exchange. The capacity to explore, transform and exploit knowledge from consumers are not mutually exclusive, but are likely complementary (Lane et al., 2006; Lichtenthaler, 2009; Zahra & George, 2002), because “their impact on innovation and performance seems to depend on one another” (Lichtenthaler, 2009: 827). Therefore, the synergy from the different dimensions of absorptive capacity would lead to the benefit that is greater than that of single processes.

3 Methodology

The objectives of this study are three-fold: *first*, to measure the capacity for consumer co-creation among tourism organizations, *second*, to assesses the influence of social media strategies (i.e., the integration of social media into destination management processes) on the capacity for consumer co-creation, and, *third*, to estimate the impact of the capacity for consumer co-creation on organization performance in terms of innovation. To measure tourism organizations’ capacity for consumer co-creation, measurement items corresponding to the absorptive capacity used in Lichtenthaler’s (2009) study that are relevant to the context of consumer integration were adopted and reworded to fit into the study context. After a consultation with four experts in tourism and social media and a back and forth translation from English to German, Italian, and French, items with redundant statements in any of the four languages were excluded. As a result, 11 items were retained for this study. Furthermore, following Marchiori and Cantoni (2012) social media strategies were assessed using 3 items to identify the extent to which tourism organizations integrate social media into their management processes. Organization’s performance was measured on 3 items to evaluate the extent of perceived success compared to competitors (development time, number of web marketing activities, development efforts) and overall web marketing success.

Questionnaires were developed and integrated into a survey on a broader theme of destination innovation and technology targeting destination marketing organizations (DMOs). All items are measured on 7-point Likert scales with 1=Strongly Disagree and 7=Strongly Agree. The survey was made available in English, German, Italian, and French, and was distributed to essentially all DMOs in Switzerland (225) and the USA (2,000) in early 2012. A total of 76 (Switzerland) and 183 (USA) complete responses, representing a response rate of 33.7% and 9.1% respectively was achieved.

To assess the multidimensionality of capacity for consumer co-creation, this study tested several alternative models using confirmatory factor analysis based on the

number of dimensions (i.e., one, three and four-dimension models). Further, higher-order factor modelling was employed to assess the complementarity of the dimensions of co-creation capacity. Higher order factor modelling has been considered useful to represent the factor structure of measurement items that assess several highly related domains that are hypothesized to comprise a general construct. Further, structural equation modelling using Mplus was employed to test the hypotheses. Several model fit indices were consulted: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) of .90 or higher (Hu & Bentler, 1999), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) up to .08 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of .05 or lower to indicate acceptable model fit.

4 Results

A hierarchical comparison with four versions of capacity for consumer co-creation construct was tested to investigate the multidimensionality of this construct. In Model 1, items were loaded into a unidimensional factor. In Version 2, items were loaded into three factors, representing explorative, transformative, and exploitative capacities (three dimension model). In Version 3, items were loaded into four factors: acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation. Comparison between Version 1 and Version 2 shows that Version 2 has a better fit due to the lower chi-square relative to the degree of freedom (see Table 1). Version 3 is slightly better than Version 2. This result supports the multidimensionality of the capacity for co-creation. The data empirically supports that the specific lower level capacities corresponding to different learning processes are distinguishable in the context of consumer co-creation.

Table 1. Hierarchical Comparison for Capacity for Co-Creation Construct

Version	χ^2 (df)	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Version 1: 1 Factor	273.31 (44)	6.21	.869	.836	.064
Version 2: 3 Factors	112.02 (41)	2.73	.959	.945	.037
Version 3: 4 Factors	101.53 (38)	2.67	.964	.947	.035
Version 4: 4 Factors + 1 2 nd order	129.89 (40)	3.24	.948	.929	.045

Note: $N=259$. Target coefficient of Model 4 using Model 3 as target model is 0.782.

To investigate the complementarity of the dimensions of co-creation capacity, Version 4 includes four first order factors and capacity for co-creation as a second order factor that accounts for the relationships between the first order factors. Target coefficient, which is the ratio of the chi-square value of the lower order factor model (Version 3) to the chi-square value of the higher order model (Version 4) was used to test the higher order factor (Marsh & Hocevar, 1985). Version 4 target coefficient of 0.782 indicates that the co-creation capacity explains 78.2% of the variation among the acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation capacities, which is not

indicative of high superiority over the lower factor model. In other words, when counting for positive effects of co-creation on performance, the higher order co-creation capacity may not represent the holistic effect that exceeds the individual effects of each dimension. However, due to the theoretical foundation of complementarity among the co-creation dimensions (Lichtenthaler, 2009), Version 4 is still of theoretical interest. Using Model 3 to estimate the direct effects of the four dimensions of co-creation capacity on performance did not result in a good model fit due to a high correlation between the latent variables. Hence, Versions 2 and 4 were used to test the hypotheses.

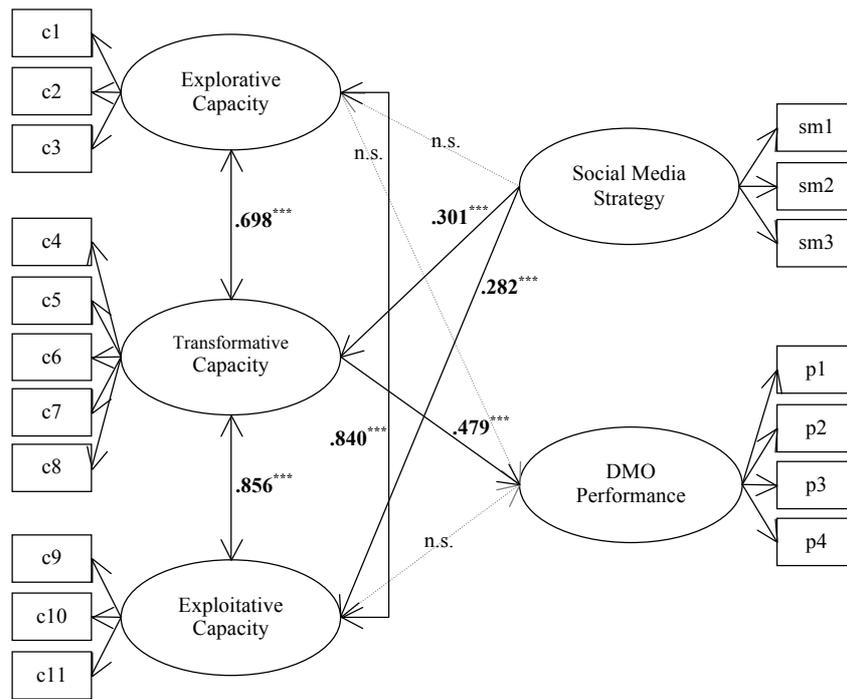
To identify the differences in terms of co-creation dimensions among American and Swiss DMOs, several independent sample t-tests were conducted. Based on Version 2, there were no significant difference in terms of explorative capacity between American ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 0.89$) and Swiss DMOs ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.30$), but there were significant differences in terms of transformative capacity (US: $M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.30$, Swiss: $M = 4.84$, $SD = 0.86$; $t(247) = -3.03$, $p < .01$) and exploitative capacity (US: $M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.08$, Swiss: $M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.16$; $t(255) = -2.99$, $p < .01$). The ratio of explorative capacity (PAC) to exploitative capacity (RAC) among American DMOs was 1.09 and among Swiss DMOs was 1.14, indicating that American DMOs are slightly more efficient in leveraging value from the acquired knowledge from consumers.

Versions 2 and 4 of the co-creation capacity construct were tested in two separate models. Discriminant and divergent validity were tested for both models using AVE and achieved satisfactory results (details not reported here due to space limitation). Using Version 2, the hypotheses were tested based on the direct effects of each of the three factors (explorative, transformative, and exploitative capacities) on DMO performance (Model 1). The model fit was acceptable ($\chi^2 = 268.878$, $df = 126$, $p = .000$, $CFI = .939$, $TLI = .926$, $RMSEA = .066$), indicating a moderate fit (see Fig. 2.). The three dimensions of co-creation capacity are highly correlated; explorative capacity is correlated with transformative capacity (.698, $p = .000$) and exploitative capacity (.840, $p = .000$), and transformative capacity is highly correlated with exploitative capacity (.856, $p = .000$).

The result shows that social media strategy has significant direct effects on transformative capacity (.301, $p = .000$) and exploitative capacity (.282, $p = .000$), but, surprisingly, has no significant effect on explorative capacity (*Hypothesis 1* was partially supported). This indicates that organizations' investment on social media may not increase their capability to identify and recognize consumers knowledge, but may increase their capability to analyse, understand, and integrate consumers knowledge into the organizations' processes and exploit the knowledge for their benefit. This can be interpreted that having an integrated social media strategy may push the organizations to go beyond listening to consumers, but going further to internalize consumers' ideas and insights into their organizational processes.

The result also showed the significant positive effect from transformative capacity on DMO performance (.479, $p = .000$), but no significant direct effects from explorative

and exploitative capacities (*Hypothesis 2* was partially supported). Again, this emphasizes the importance of knowledge transformation within the organizations. In other words, the key to successful innovation is the efficient organizational process that bridges the potential and realized capacity for consumer co-creation.



Note: $\chi^2 = 268.878$, $df = 126$, $p = .000$, $CFI = .939$, $TLI = .926$, $RMSEA = .066$, $N = 259$

Fig. 2. Model 1: Direct Effects (derived from Version 2)

Using Version 4, the hypothesis testing was estimated based on the complementarity of the dimensions of consumer co-creation on DMO performance (Model 2, see Fig. 3). The model fit was acceptable ($\chi^2 = 297.755$, $df = 129$, $p < .001$, $CFI = .928$, $TLI = .915$, $RMSEA = .071$), indicating a moderate fit. The result showed that social media strategy significantly affects co-creation capacity (.313, $p < .001$), indicating that having an integrated social media strategy increases organizations' capacity to integrate consumers in the process of co-creation (*Hypothesis 1* was supported). Further, the capacity for co-creation was found to significantly affect DMO performance (.379, $p < .001$), indicating that having a combination of four dimensions of co-creation capacity may result in a higher innovation performance (*Hypothesis 2* was supported). However, compared to the previous model, the estimate of the effect on performance is slightly lower. This may be due to the lower T coefficient of co-creation capacity construct Version 4 over Version 3, which may point to a portion of direct effects from the lower order factors that is not captured by the higher order factor.

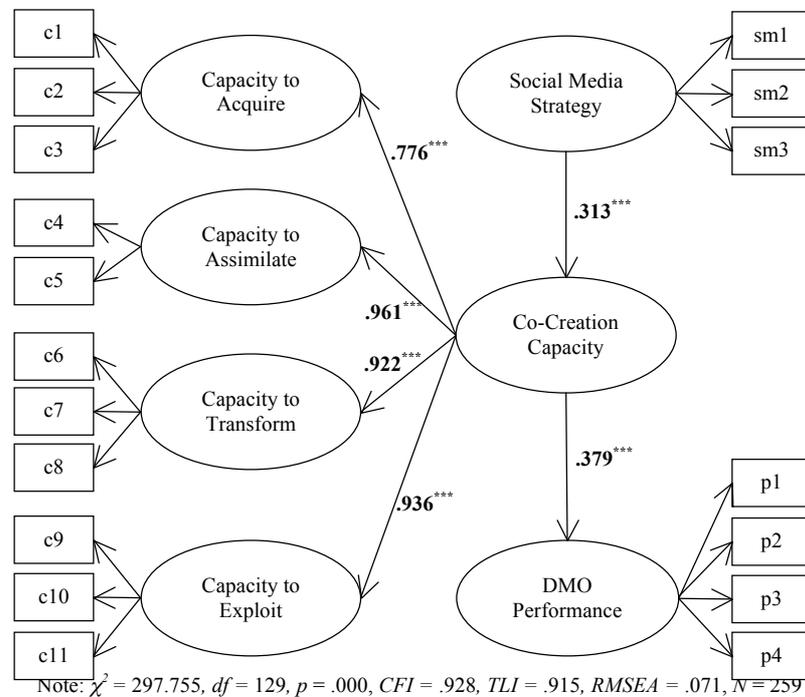


Fig. 3. Model 2: Complementarity

5 Conclusion

As consumer integration has been considered important in the process of innovation, it is imperative for tourism organizations to identify knowledgeable and experienced consumers and create avenues for them to participate in the new product/service development. Consumer co-creation in tourism is particularly important because of the experiential nature of tourism products. Hence, conceptualizing the capability of tourism organizations to integrate consumer for co-creation activities has an important theoretical as well as managerial implication. Drawing from the concept of absorptive capacity, which is the capability of organizations to extract and integrate external knowledge for their benefit, this study conceptualized the concept capacity for consumer co-creation. The results showed that capacity for consumer co-creation is a multidimensional capacity, which consist of lower order capabilities. The three and four dimension versions (Versions 2-4) were identified as better models than the unidimensional model, indicating that the lower order capacities are distinguishable. Therefore, it can be suggested that tourism organization's capacity to work together with consumers in the process of innovation can be measured by their capacity to explore knowledge (i.e., acquire knowledge from consumers), transform knowledge within their organization, and exploit the knowledge for new product/service development.

This study also emphasizes the importance of social media strategies to enhance the co-creation capabilities. As social media has changed the landscape of consumer participation, it is argued that organizations that nurture relationships with consumers in social media have higher capacity to recognize, understand, and analyse consumer information for their benefit. From Model 2, it is shown that making social media as one of the channels where organizations play will impact positively on their capacity for co-creation. Specifically, when taking into account the direct effects to each of the lower order dimensions of co-creation capacity (Model 1), social media strategy significantly affects transformative and exploitative learning. This can be interpreted that organizations who mastered the realms of social media will be better at transforming relevant consumer information into valuable organization knowledge applicable for innovation. Lastly, this study also provided empirical support for a significant positive impact of capacity for consumer co-creation on organization performance, particularly when taking into account the complementarity of all the capacity's dimensions. Specifically, the direct effect model indicated that transformative capacity is particularly significant in impacting the organization performance. That is to say, in order for tourism organizations to be successful at innovating with consumers, they should focus on nurturing the mechanism and culture within the organizations that allow for knowledge to be maintained and transformed into valuable assets. The measurement of organization performance in this research was based on perceived performance, which may limit the interpretation of the results. Future research should address this by measuring the actual innovation performance resulted from consumer insights through social media.

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