

# **“How do tour guides cope with knowledgeable tourists? Conceptualising knowledge/information asymmetry in tour-guiding contexts”**

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

Tourists' resource integration both offers opportunities and presents challenges to tourism service providers. Focussing on the tour guide perspective, this paper explores how tour guides experience knowledge/information-based asymmetry in encounters with tourists, and identifies the roles and coping strategies used by guides to facilitate service co-production.

### **Methodology**

Critical incident technique (CIT) is used in qualitative interviews with 47 tour guides in Scotland, broadly representative of the Scottish tour guiding context. 107 critical incidents were analysed, with an average of 2.32 incidents per interview. Narrative analysis of the incidents was performed inductively in four iterative steps using QSR NVivo.

### **Findings**

Three resource asymmetry incident categories are identified: 1) Probing - Guide-Oracle is questioned by inquiring tourists and copes through diverting, evasion, and follow-up strategies; 2) Learning - Guide-Magpie learns from expert tourists through acknowledging and co-delivery; and 3) Negotiation - Guide-Diplomat with greater knowledge helps misguided tourists save face through appeasing, following the official line, and tactfully correcting.

### **Originality**

The paper contributes to service co-production research in tourism by theorising about contexts where knowledge/information asymmetry exists between tour guides and tourists, particularly where fluid power relations between guides and knowledgeable tourists occur, or where misguided tourists co-produce the service by prioritising own meanings. Findings highlight the importance of soft skills and other non-content capabilities of guides, and suggestions are offered for effective training and resource sharing/ learning initiatives for tour guiding services.

**Keywords**

Co-production; tour guiding; resource integration; resource asymmetry.

## **¿Cómo se enfrentan los guías turísticos a los turistas conocedores? Conceptualización de la asimetría conocimiento/información en contextos de guías turísticos**

### **Propósito**

La integración de recursos de los turistas ofrece oportunidades y presenta desafíos para los proveedores de servicios turísticos. Centrándose en la perspectiva de los guías turísticos, este artículo explora cómo los guías turísticos experimentan una asimetría basada en conocimiento/información en encuentros con turistas, e identifica los roles y estrategias de afrontamiento utilizados por los guías para facilitar la coproducción de servicios.

### **Metodología**

La técnica de incidentes críticos (CIT) se utiliza en entrevistas cualitativas con 47 guías turísticos en Escocia, ampliamente representativos del contexto de los guías turísticos escoceses. Se analizaron 107 incidentes críticos, con una media de 2,32 incidentes por entrevista. El análisis narrativo de los incidentes se realizó de forma inductiva en cuatro pasos iterativos utilizando QSR NVivo.

### **Hallazgos**

Se identifican tres categorías de incidentes de asimetría de recursos: 1) Sondeo: los turistas interrogan a Guide-Oracle y lo afronta mediante estrategias de desvío, evasión y seguimiento; 2) Aprendizaje: Guide-Magpie aprende de turistas expertos a través del reconocimiento y la entrega conjunta; y 3) Negociación: el guía-diplomático con mayor conocimiento ayuda a los turistas descarriados a salvar las apariencias apaciguándolos, siguiendo la línea oficial y corrigiendo con tacto.

### **Originalidad**

El artículo contribuye a la investigación de la coproducción de servicios en el turismo al teorizar sobre contextos donde existe asimetría de conocimiento/información entre guías turísticos y turistas, particularmente donde ocurren relaciones de poder fluidas entre guías y turistas conocedores, o donde turistas equivocados coproducen el servicio priorizando propios significados. Los hallazgos resaltan la importancia de las habilidades interpersonales y otras capacidades de los guías no relacionadas con el contenido, y se ofrecen sugerencias para iniciativas efectivas de capacitación e intercambio de recursos/aprendizaje para los servicios de guías turísticos.

### **Palabras clave**

Co-producción; guía turística; integración de recursos; asimetría de recursos.

## 導遊如何應對知識淵博的遊客？導遊環境中知識/資訊不對稱的概念化

### 目的

游客资源整合为旅游服务提供商提供了机遇，同时也带来了挑战。本文以导游视角为重点，探讨了导游在与游客接触中如何体验知识/信息不对称，并识别了导游用于促进服务共同生产的角色和应对策略。

### 方法

本研究采用关键事件技术 (CIT) 进行质性访谈，对象为苏格兰的47名导游，广泛代表苏格兰导游环境。分析了107个关键事件，每次访谈平均2.32个事件。对事件的叙述分析在QSR NVivo中通过四个迭代步骤进行归纳性分析。

### 发现

确定了三个资源不对称的事件类别：1) 探询 - 导游-神谕被询问，通过转移、回避和后续策略来应对询问的游客；2) 学习 - 导游-喜鹊通过承认和共同交付从专业游客中学到经验；3) 协商 - 导游-外交官以更多知识帮助误导的游客保全体面，通过安抚、追随官方路线和巧妙纠正来应对。

### 独创性

本文通过理论化导游和游客之间存在知识/信息不对称的情境，特别是在导游和知识丰富的游客之间存在流动权力关系的情况下，或者误导的游客通过优先考虑自己的意义来共同生产服务的情境，为旅游服务的共同生产研究做出了贡献。研究结果强调了导游的软技能和其他非内容能力的重要性，并提出了关于为导游服务提供有效培训和资源共享/学习倡议的建议。

### 关键词

共同生产；导游；资源整合；资源不对称。

## 1. Introduction

Due to its experiential nature, extended customer journeys, increased contact between customers and frontline staff, and tourists' increasingly active role in meaning-making, tourism has been seen as a particularly relevant context for research on service co-production. Various studies view tourists as co-producers of the tourism experience, as well as co-creators of meaning and experiential value (Alexiou, 2018; Buonincontri *et al.*, 2017; Campos *et al.*, 2018; Prebensen *et al.*, 2013; Prebensen and Foss, 2011). Increasingly, the role of the service provider, and by extension the frontline staff who represent tourism organisations, is shifting away from delivering memorable experiences, and towards co-ordinating customers' resource integration processes (Bowen, 2016).

Tour guiding is a particularly interesting tourism context in terms of the study of service co-production and experience co-creation. Tour guides are traditionally viewed as the 'fount of knowledge', directing both what to see and how to understand what is being seen (Cohen, 1985). Indeed, Holloway (1981) notes that information giving is of greatest importance in the tour guides' drive for professional status. But as Reisinger and Steiner (2006) suggest, tourists have become more inquisitive, looking for authentic ways to find meaning in places and destinations. They turn into storytellers, often thanks to the technology that places information at their fingertips (Jonasson and Scherle, 2012). This means that guides need to be increasingly creative in mentoring tourists, providing companionship, and activating tourists' operant resources to facilitate personal meaning-making (Pu *et al.*, 2023; Ross, 2020) and value creation (Alexiou, 2018; Galí and Camprubí, 2020; Larsen and Widtfeldt Meged, 2013; Weiler and Black, 2015).

Research suggests that tourism providers can gain competitive advantage by tapping into tourists' operant resources to augment and enhance tourist experiences (Campos *et al.*, 2018). In addition, guides sometimes integrate tourists' resources into their narrative and performance, thus effectively making tourists co-producers of a tour (Jonasson and Scherle, 2012; Weiler and Black, 2015). But scenarios may also arise where it is difficult to co-produce by effectively integrating tourists' resources. Knowledge or information asymmetry is an important factor in such situations. For example, guides dealing with specialist/expert tourists, who wish to share information during the tour, may potentially perceive such encounters as stressful (Murdy *et al.*, 2016).

Focussing on the relatively under-researched perspective of guides as frontline employees in a service co-production situation, this paper aims to explore how tour guides experience knowledge/information resource asymmetry, identify different types of information resources employed by tourists, and highlight the roles and coping strategies guides employ to facilitate effective service co-production.

## **2. Theoretical overview**

### **2.1. Resource integration and asymmetrical resources**

Customers co-produce services by integrating operant and operand resources with those of the company and other customers, and in so doing, co-create their own experiential value (Lusch and Vargo, 2014). Operand resources include tangible goods and materials over which the customer has allocative capabilities, while operant resources are those over which the customer has authoritative capability (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Operant resources include cultural resources, such as specialised knowledge and skills, history and imagination, and social resources, such as family and commercial relationships, brand communities, and consumer tribes (Arnould *et al.*, 2006).

The prevalence of customers' participatory roles, alongside the growth of customer engagement behaviours surrounding service exchanges, means that the provision of operant resources by customers for firms is increasingly common (see Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Customers attuned to learning gather resources prior to committing to a purchase or experience (Hibbert *et al.*, 2012). The implication is that customer knowledge may exceed those operant resources available to the service provider; a kind of resource asymmetry between firm and customer (Murdy *et al.*, 2016).

Several authors have studied resource asymmetry from the perspective of power relationships between firm and customer and the potential for one party to act in an opportunistic way to the detriment of others (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011; Peñaloza and Venkatesh, 2006).

Nevertheless, there is a gap around an alternative form of resource asymmetry; one that relates to operant knowledge/information-based resources present in exchanges between staff and customers. This is significant; as Murdy *et al.*'s (2016) study of ancestral tourism encounters shows, given the level of time and effort heritage tourists often invest into researching their ancestral links, service provider's inability to meet the information provision requirements of such tourists can have negative consequences. The authors

observed situations where customer knowledge exceeded that of the service employee or where customers believed their resource set to be superior (even when it may not be). They concluded that, where the knowledge sets of the visitor and guide are incompatible, creativity and different forms of adaptative delivery are needed to ensure a satisfactory encounter (Murdy *et al.*, 2016).

Bowen (2016) calls for new theoretical and practical perspectives on the importance of the frontline employee roles for service co-production and co-creation. He particularly notes the importance of studying and developing the skills and capabilities of frontline employees in their roles as innovators (a source of creativity); differentiators (through authentic delivery); enablers (facilitating and integrating customer processes and resources); and co-ordinators (interdependent role with understanding of specific forms of resource integration processes and practices). Murdy *et al.*'s (2016) research highlights the importance of some of these roles in ancestral tourism contexts, but there is more work to be done to explore the coordinator role of frontline staff, particularly with respect to resource integration of asymmetric knowledge/information resources in highly co-creative tourism contexts.

## **2.2. Co-production in tour guiding**

Tour guides are traditionally viewed as holding high cultural capital, and the information they disseminate is of almost academic character (Cohen, 1985). Guides must be able to captivate their audiences with entertaining tales and a witty performance, while enacting highly performative work scripted by invisible cultural norms and behavioural etiquettes (Hansen and Mossberg, 2017). In guiding encounters tourists appear to have the upper hand in that there is an expectation for them to be treated respectfully and in a dignified fashion to avoid customer dissatisfaction (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006).

Goffman's (1963) interaction order states that there is an expectation of one's behaviour avoiding harm to other people's face when they make mistakes or lack knowledge or skills. Where such expected behaviour is not followed, this is externalised in enactments of a power struggle, especially where tourists have a reason to doubt the guide's credibility and competence. Larsen and Widtfeldt Meged (2013) note that this is often the case where young or inexperienced guides are faced with knowledgeable tourists, eager to ask tricky questions. Somewhat surprisingly, there is a lack of research on how such power struggle may be dealt with and what coping strategies may be employed by guides.

Weiler and Black (2015) suggest that guides increasingly mediate or broker memorable and meaningful experiences for tourists whose roles shift from a passive audience to active participators and performers. As Zatori (2016) observes, tour guides need to give control to the consumer to ensure the uniqueness of the tour and to enable them to discover their own meanings. But tourists often bring a range of ‘tactics’ into the tourist encounter, enacting their own agendas and in which fluid power relations between guides and tourists can occur. Tucker (2007) reports on tourists’ mocking and resistant behaviour as representing creative ways of co-producing the tour for themselves. Other authors comment on tourists’ agency and role reversal; as Larsen and Widtfeldt Meged (2013, p.92) note, “tourists have the right not [sic] to pay attention, [to] ask questions, interrupt and even challenge the authority of the guide”. Consequently, tourists, as other customers in experiential service environments, are liable to co-produce the service experience in idiosyncratic ways that may radically alter what the service producers intended.

On the other hand, tourists may choose to perform in accord with the tour guide and use their resources to co-produce the service experience for themselves and for others. Alexiou (2018) notes that tourists on guided tours like to be engaged in conversations with the guide and with others to satisfy their curiosity. Larsen and Widtfeldt Meged (2013) report on tourists offering assistance where the guide’s knowledge fell short, or where they believed they knew more than the guide. They ask questions to interrupt the guide’s narrative or complete the guide’s sentences. Some examples are given of the strategies used by guides to manage such situations, including the guide actively trying to incorporate tourists’ participatory activities into their narrative. In other cases, guides found questions stressful and tried to curtail or discourage overly inquisitive tourists (Larsen and Widtfeldt Meged, 2013). Ross (2020) expands on some of these strategies; guides at Portuguese archaeological sites used tourists’ input to permit individual interpretations or promote creative discussions, though they had reservations about the value of tourists’ knowledge in light of the ‘official’ narrative.

The above studies offer insights into the often-challenging nature of employee-tourist encounter characterised by knowledge asymmetry from a customer’s perspective. They suggest that the design and performance of guided tours should take into account tourists’ tactics (Larsen and Widtfeldt Meged, 2013). But more research is needed focussing on the guides’ perspective, to aid understanding how guides cope with and respond to such asymmetrical encounters.



### 3. Methodology

We utilised the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) in qualitative interviews conducted with tour guides working in a range of tourism contexts in Scotland. CIT was originally used as a quantitative positivist method for identifying similarities, differences, and patterns in human behaviour by collecting data about significant instances or incidents related to a specific activity (Flanagan, 1954). But CIT is also be used as a qualitative technique which, combined with grounded theory and narrative data content analysis, enables the development of practical outcomes and management implications, particularly when applied in service research (Chell and Pittaway, 1998; Gremler, 2004).

In the context of this study, the purpose of CIT was to identify specific contextualised examples of guide-tourist encounters that would exemplify information resource asymmetry, and reveal the ways in which guides deal with such situations. A critical incident was required to meet the following criteria:

- Involves a discreet episode of a direct encounter between the interviewed guide and a tourist, in which there is a discernible information resource asymmetry (such as tourists proffering information),
- Provides enough detail to be easily visualised and fully understood by the interviewer,
- Takes place within a physical tourism setting (rather than online or in other non-tourism settings).

A total of 47 guides were selected purposively who were either in possession of a professional guiding qualification or employed in a guiding role in Scotland, and ranged in terms of levels of experience, age, and gender. Weiler and Black's (2014, p.8) five-type categorisation of tour guiding (generalist tour guide; extended tour-driver guide; nature-based/adventure tour guide; heritage interpreter/guide; city guide) was used as the basis for sampling as it is broadly representative of the Scottish guiding context, and tour guiding more broadly. Guiding roles may overlap into different tourism genres (Weiler and Black, 2014) and this was the case with several guides in the final sample. Table I summarises key demographic information and guiding categories in the sample (pseudonyms are used to protect guide anonymity).

Most interviews were conducted face-to-face (43 interviews), though two were conducted via Skype and two by email. Average interview length was 26 minutes, although one interview lasted only 4 mins as the guide had to leave promptly to tend to visitors. Due to operational

restrictions, five interviews took place with a small group of guides, while the rest was done with individuals. The interviewer would start by establishing the specific nature of the guides' activities and then asked the guides to recall significant incidents in which the visitor 1) had more information/knew more than the guide, or where they 2) thought they knew more than the guide, as two basic types of information asymmetry (Larsen and Widtfeldt Meged, 2013; Murdy *et al.*, 2016). Unstructured probing questions ("When was this?" "Who was there?" "Could you tell me a bit more about that?") helped to gather more details about each incident.

***\*Table I about here***

The average number of critical incidents per interview was 2.32 with a total of 107 usable critical incidents. This is broadly in line with previous qualitative interview-based CIT studies, which according to Gremler (2004) range between 50 and several thousand incidents. Analysis involved an inductive process that classified critical incidents into well defined, mutually exclusive categories and sub-categories. Two researchers began by coding manually the initial interviews, with subsequent analysis taking place in QSR's NVivo 12 to ensure consistency and reliability of coding.

Analysis took place in 4 iterative stages. In the first stage, interviews were coded in NVivo to uncover a total of 10 broad-brush categories relating to the type of asymmetry ('Visitors know more'; 'Visitors think they know more'), visitor information resources (e.g. 'Visitors personal stories', 'Trivia', 'Expert visitors'), the situations or conditions in which such asymmetry was observed ('Enquiring', 'Collaborative' and 'Confrontational'), guides' emotional responses/coping strategies (e.g., 'Feeling upset'; 'Becoming more aware'), and any discernible future outcomes from the incidents (e.g., 'Training implications', 'Guide learning'). The second step involved coding-on to uncover granularities in the sub-categories and subsequent reduction by removing irrelevant codes, condensing categories into themes, and describing their contents, similar to open and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The process resulted in 6 broader categories: 'Situation types'; 'Asymmetry types'; 'Guides responses'; 'Dealing strategies'; 'Future outcomes'; and, 'Other'.

In the third analytical step, NVivo's memos and matrix query function were utilised to identify patterns and links between categories. For example, one of the matrix queries discovered a clear prevalence of integrative and collaborative strategies of guides in situations where tourists possessed higher knowledge resource levels. In the final step, the

categories were re-assigned manually to reflect the linkages and analytical notes captured through memo writing. The following section outlines the resulting three knowledge asymmetry incident categories (Probing, Learning, Negotiation), and tourist resource types and guides' coping/dealing strategies associated with each of these.

#### **4. Study findings**

The findings discussed in this section are summarised in Table 2, along with descriptive examples of critical incidents.

*\* Table 2 about here*

##### **4.1. Probing incidents**

Guiding literature views as 'normal' those situations where the guide is the one who possesses superior knowledge, knows all the answers to visitors' questions, and as such is the dominant party in the exchange. In this study we deliberately did not ask about incidents that may relate to this 'guide-as-oracle' role. But it became evident that the guides also considered as a significant form of knowledge resource asymmetry those situations where they were unable to provide immediate answers to tourists' queries.

Tourists' questions may stem from curiosity stirred up by some stimuli (previous or immediately following something the guide said or showed), or their desire to fill a knowledge gap or follow up on something they had heard or read. The resource asymmetry therefore stems not necessarily from a resource imbalance, but from the guide's objective lack of knowledge. Although tourists' resources are similarly inferior, the guides must act proactively to maintain their credibility. As John pointed out, "*as a tour guide you don't want to look wrong, you want to be knowledgeable because it adds credibility to everything else you are saying.*" The ability to adapt to the situation is crucial; guides who can observe the audience's body language and facial expressions during the talk and gauge their reactions appear to be better equipped to avoid difficult queries.

Three ways of dealing with such incidents emerged: 1) guides discussed how 'sticky' enquiring situations could be avoided by *diverting* visitors' attention away from topics they are not too knowledgeable about. This is relatively simple on coach tours, where the scenery changes all the time and guides can choose what they are going to talk about. Another strategy when faced with a difficult question is 2) to guard against the possibility of providing

a factually incorrect answer by *being evasive*, softening or generalising their formulation. Paula talked about using “woolly language” when making statements that could be interpreted as definitive, with evasive phrases such as “as I understand it...”. Last, where tourists insist on having their questions answered, 3) the guides would ask for help from other knowledgeable colleagues, take the tourist’s contact details and *follow up* with answers, or suggest other possible sources of information.

#### **4.2. Learning incidents**

This incident category represents situations where tourists objectively possess greater knowledge/information resources than the guide. Tourists’ knowledge was revealed during the tour where expert/specialist tourists spontaneously expanded on something the guide said. But there were also incidents where the guide was corrected by a tourist who noted a factual error in the narration. Different types of tourists’ knowledge involved in these scenarios include: factual expertise of tourists-specialists (e.g. covering areas such as history, animal keeping, geology); information from another credible source (e.g. another guide or a guidebook); tourists’ personal histories and experiences (e.g. family connection with a place; anecdotes of lived experiences that relate to the object of interpretation); and, trivia not necessarily related to the object of discussion but useful to the guide’s storyline. As Eddie remarked, “*guides are like magpies*”, constantly searching for useful tidbits of facts, trivia or personal stories that will help to expand their knowledge base and enrich their narrative. Many guides therefore tended to treat encounters with expert tourists as an opportunity to learn.

Guides used two distinctive coping strategies to deal with tourists’ superior resource scenario: 1) guides *acknowledge* tourists’ superior resources by actively listening, thanking them, and showing appreciation for their interests and knowledge. In the second case, 2) guides used *co-delivery* as a coping strategy. In co-delivery, guides personalise the service encounter and make it more meaningful for other customers. Flexibility and openness were needed to help the guides deal with knowledgeable tourists, and to let them take centre stage. Letting the visitor be ‘in charge’ can be beneficial for the rest of the tour participants. At the same time, guides are aware that an expert visitor threatens to ‘highjack’ the tour, and in such cases, co-delivery must be carefully managed, so as not to impinge on the rest of the tour. Guides would then often integrate new information into their narrative, although it was important to first verify its credibility.

### **4.3. Negotiation incidents**

The last category represents incidents where guides were challenged by tourists who *perceived* their knowledge/information resource levels as higher than those of the guide. The tourist, convinced of their own subjective truth, would question or even confront the guide in persisting with their own meanings, leaving the guide to negotiate the encounter in a respectful and diplomatic manner to help visitors save face. The knowledge resources held by tourists who challenged the guide included: misremembered facts (e.g. tourists had picked up a fact in the literature or through word-of-mouth and took it to be correct); incorrect assumptions due to previous lived experience with the topic (e.g. they have been to the site before, or had a similar experience elsewhere); or, strong convictions based on personal values and beliefs (e.g. religious, ideological, political) that mean that visitors were unable or unwilling to accept the guides' point of view.

The strategies to handle such situations depend to some extent on the experience and personality of the guide, though were often guided by organisational policy as well as the nature of the contested knowledge. At times it was impossible to 'prove' who is right as much of the information guides work with is based on historical interpretation. Three response types were discussed: Guides coped through 1) *appeasing* visitors by accepting alternative (subjective) meanings. 'Good customer service' code was evident that requires the guides to be respectful, not to become agitated and not to alienate the guest by highlighting their lack of knowledge or confronting their (misguided) claims. Another strategy was 2) to remain neutral and *follow the official line* or company discourse (e.g., by referring to the 'credible' research and information available to the guides or the training they have had). Eddie referred to "keeping the middle line", which represents the base point from which guides negotiate their interactions with challenging visitors.

Last, in cases where obvious factual misinformation was evident, 3) guides tried to identify the source of the misinformation and then attempted to *correct* this. They felt it was their responsibility to ensure that visitors do not leave with incorrect facts, but did so in a diplomatic and 'gentle' manner. In correcting, guides may emphasise only certain aspects of a story to prioritise the meanings visitors associate with a place or object of interpretation, while still delivering factually correct information.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

Taking a guides' perspective on tour guiding encounters, this study has explored in detail the specific types of knowledge/information asymmetries that tourists bring into the tourist-guide encounter, identifying Probing, Learning and Negotiation as three key incident types, and highlighting the roles and coping strategies guides employ to achieve favourable service encounter outcomes (Figure 1).

*\*Figure 1 here*

During Probing incidents, guides represent the 'Oracle', who nevertheless has to protect their credibility by proactively offering alternative solutions to inquisitive tourists. Diverting, using evasive 'woolly language', and following up on visitor queries not only takes off some pressure in potentially uncomfortable situations, but such strategies also benefit the tourists, who are made to feel their questions contribute to the guides' performance. This reflects earlier findings from the literature; Jonasson and Scherle (2012) note that 'good' guides often invite their audiences to be part of the tour by providing them with affordances to engage, for example by asking tourists questions aimed at reflection on their own role.

The second category – Learning incidents – cast the guide into the role of 'Magpie', always in search of useful, interesting, or engaging stories and 'titbits' of information to add to their narrative. Guides generally appreciate and acknowledge visitors' superior knowledge, using skills such as active listening. Guiding literature agrees that information is the guides' main currency (Cohen, 1985; Holloway, 1981). However, we also reveal that guides' fears of being 'upstaged' by more knowledgeable tourists who may challenge their credibility in front of others (Holloway, 1981) were forgone in favour of letting expert tourists take the centre stage through co-delivery.

In the third Negotiation incidents category, the guide acts as a 'Diplomat', appeasing 'misguided' tourists who have alternative views, values and ideas, and who wish to use these to co-create their own authentic experiences. Ross (2020) notes that this can be an issue in heritage tourism, where guides are limited by the bounds of institutionally authorised discourse and thus fail to integrate tourists' interpretations into the broader tourist experience. We showed this was indeed the case where guides fall on the official company line to placate tourists who challenge well-established (usually historical) facts. But we also extend existing research by indicating where guides strive to avoid disappointing those who hold a romantic image of the object of the tour or for whom it holds deep personal meanings (Murdy *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, previous studies note that the guides' adherence to the 'commercial

frame' means that guides feel obliged to answer all questions, or to address potentially problematic topics of politics, religion or sex, because of tourists' commercial power (Jonasson and Scherle, 2012; Larsen and Widtfeldt Meged, 2013). We found little evidence of this; on the contrary, guides appeared proficient at negotiating and explaining their own position, while gently correcting tourists to help them save face in front of the rest of the tour group.

### **5.1. Theoretical implications**

This study makes two key contributions to theory. First, we shed light on an area in service co-production research that has previously been neglected, by focussing on service scenarios where there is asymmetry between the information/knowledge-based resources of customers (i.e., tourists participating in guided tours) and frontline staff (i.e., tour guides). Thus, we expand on the role of frontline staff as co-ordinators in service co-production as an area of study that deserves further attention (Bowen, 2016). Co-creation research suggests that the types of asymmetries identified here may well be relevant in other service contexts. For example, expert customers in retail contexts communicate product-specific knowledge with other tourists (Parker and Ward, 2000), patients share their knowledge and experience within patient communities (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2009), and tourists with lived experience of a tourism product, service, or destination impart information via online review platforms (Sthapit and Björk, 2019; Tao and Kim, 2022). Our findings therefore have implications for other service contexts and offer a useful starting point for a better understanding of the mechanisms by which frontline staff may deal with customers' service co-production in asymmetrical resource contexts.

Second, we contribute to tour guiding research by explaining how guides manage tourists' resource integration. The view of the tour guide as an 'oracle' (Cohen, 1985) and tourists as passive audience has long been questioned. But work on alternative roles and practices of guides who deal with increasingly emancipated, knowledgeable, and resourceful tourists is still in its infancy. Few authors have explored the strategies guides employ to deal with tourists' own co-creative practices, particularly where tourists' have objectively/ subjectively superior information resources (i.e. tourists know more or 'think' they know more than the guide). This is a particularly problematic area from the point of view of how guides cope with stress stemming from tourists' power struggle, and as such our research provides important insights to facilitate the wellbeing of guides.

## **5.2. Practical implications**

The study has practical implications for tour providers and other stakeholders in tour management, who should be increasingly aware of the types of asymmetries that may come about, the specific tourist resources that guides manage, and the best coping strategies to address specific scenarios. First, tour guide training and professional development programmes traditionally focus on guides' interpretive and educational role, emphasising content learning (Hansen and Mossberg, 2017). But we have shown that when faced with Probing, Learning, and Negotiation incidents that involve information resource asymmetries guides can no longer completely rely on informational/content competency and instead require high levels of soft skills such as flexibility, diplomacy, empathy, and emotional intelligence. They actively listen, negotiate, and collaborate to enable tourists' own resource integration efforts, and to better facilitate service co-production. Active learning techniques such as role play (Weiler and Black, 2014) could help guides choose the right communication style in specific situations, while developing choreography and performative skills could help guides create more immersive, authentic experiences that emphasise stories and meanings (Jonasson and Scherle, 2012).

Second, previous research suggests that guides who are faced with increasingly knowledgeable tourists (as we saw in the Probing incidents) may experience stress and job burnout (Murphy *et al.*, 2016). Surprisingly this was not the case in our study, and while some of the (younger) guides may need additional support through interpersonal skills training (including assertiveness, conflict management), guides appear to be already very good at self-learning based on reflections on what works and what does not. Guide training programmes should teach guides to become more reflective practitioners, by utilising tools such as critical incidents reviews, journal writing, etc. (Jonasson and Scherle, 2012).

Additionally, tour operators, tourist attraction and destination management stakeholders could invest into creating content wikis on shared digital platforms that guides could draw on to facilitate continuous learning and develop their capabilities. This is already happening in a lot of places, but less so in the context of independent guiding. In a similar vein, by tapping into various sharing economy platforms for tourists, guides could encourage the sharing of tourists' own knowledge and information and further build their own content capabilities (see Shang *et al.*, 2023).

## **5.3. Limitations and future research**



In this paper we focus on resource integration and asymmetry in the context of knowledge/information-based resources and have therefore only considered the educational aspects of tour guiding. Other dimensions of the tour guiding role should also be explored, including instrumental (organisational, planning and service-management-oriented tasks); relational (managing group conflict, motivating, and creating rapport with tourists and other stakeholders); and performative roles (Hansen and Mossberg, 2017). Additionally, while an effort was made to include a diverse sample in terms of the types of guides, gender, level of experience and guiding context, it is possible that more niche, or different geographical and cultural guiding contexts may yield different insights (Galí and Camprubí, 2020). Future studies should therefore consider the themes presented here in a variety of other tour guiding contexts, and indeed, explore the challenges posed by knowledgeable customers in other service settings (e.g. healthcare; banking; automobile; specialist/hobby retail to name a few).

The CIT-based qualitative interview method utilised here focusses on critical incidents related to knowledge resource asymmetry from the guides' perspective. But the efficacy of the technique relies on the interviewees' ability to remember significant incidents in sufficient detail (Chell and Pittaway, 1998). This may be problematic, as guides experience many incidents that are similar in nature and so may have recall issues or may not provide sufficient level of detail. Future research could consider alternative data gathering methods, such as ethnographic/ observation-based techniques or self-reported diary writing, to ensure a more comprehensive picture of the tourist-guide encounter.

Last, the outcomes of the asymmetry incidents were subjectively determined by the interviewed guides, and so it is not certain that guides' actions always resulted in positive outcomes for tourists. Future research may wish to explore the issues identified here from the customer/tourist perspective, or quantitatively determine, for example, the efficacy of the coping strategies identified in this paper in facilitating co-created tourism experiences and value types.

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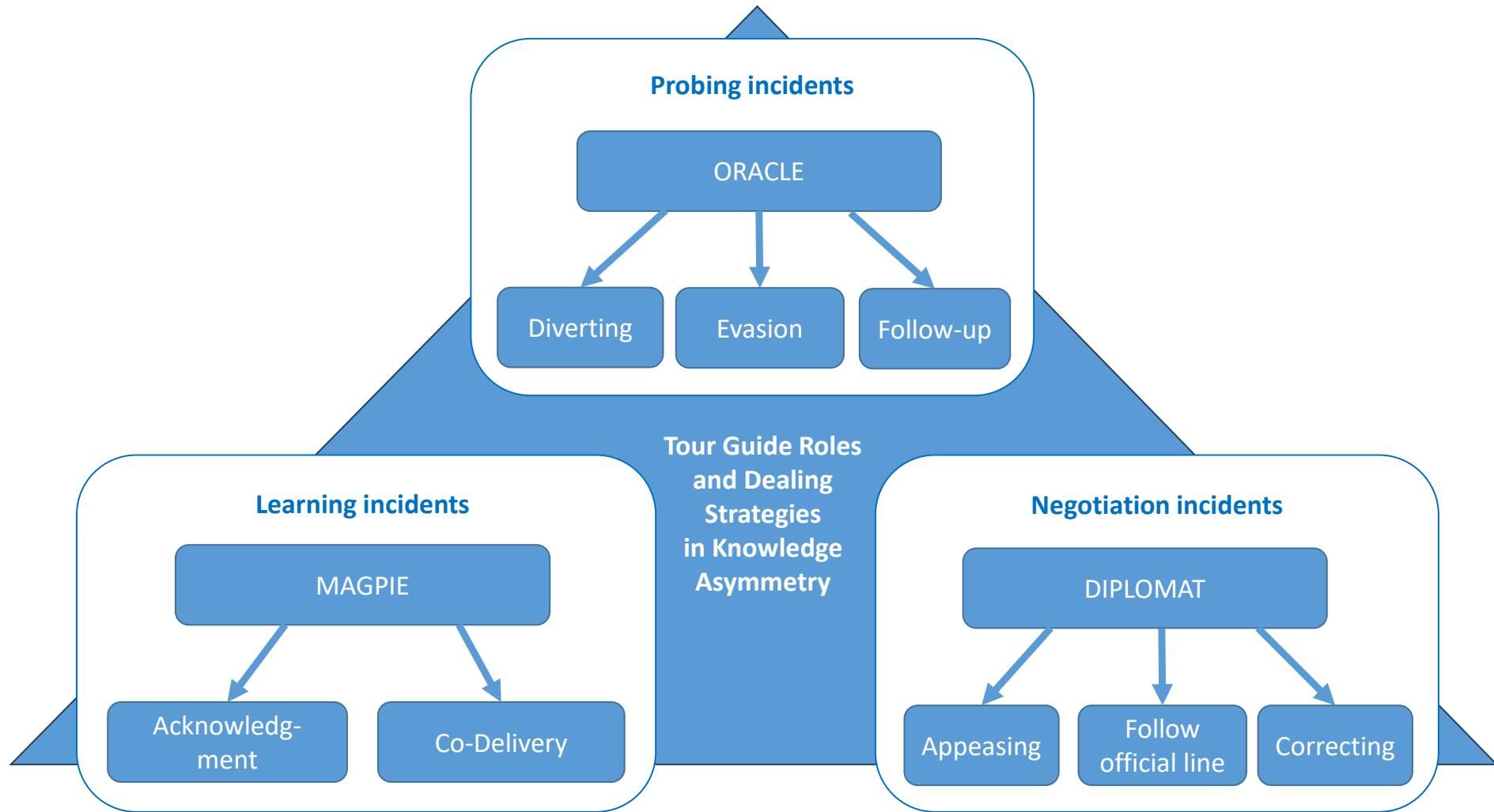
**Table I. Interviewee characteristics**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Level of experience</b>	<b>Type of guide</b>	<b>Guiding context</b>
Adam	62	Very experienced	City/Heritage guide	Art museum
Alec	24	New guide	Heritage guide	Maritime attraction
Alice	53	Very experienced	Generalist/Extended tour guide	Multi-day coach tours
Archie	74	Very experienced	City/Heritage guide	Transport museum
Ben	57	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
Cathy	23	Some experience	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
Chloe	22	New guide	Heritage guide	Whisky heritage attraction
David	52	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
Derek	43	Very experienced	Nature-based tour guide	Wildlife attraction
Donald	41	Very experienced	Extended tour guide	Small group driving tours
Eddie	47	Very experienced	Nature-based tour guide	Bird-watching tours
Emily	43	New guide	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
Ethan	19	New guide	Generalist guide	Science attraction
Evelyn	42	Very experienced	City/Heritage guide	Sporting venue
Hellen	44	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Historical archives
Henry	53	Very experienced	Extended tour guide	Small group driving tours
Isabel	27	New guide	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
James	41	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Whisky heritage attraction
Joanne	45	New guide	City/Heritage guide	Art museum
John	43	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Whisky heritage attraction
Julia	37	New guide	Heritage guide	Whisky heritage attraction
Kaylee	35	Some experience	Heritage guide	Historical archives
Keith	62	Very experienced	City/Heritage guide	Transport museum
Kenneth	48	Very experienced	City guide	City walking tours
Lee	36	Some experience	Heritage guide	Historical archives
Lisa	54	New guide	Heritage guide	Whisky heritage attraction
Lucas	43	Very experienced	Nature-based tour guide	Wildlife attraction
Lucy	53	Very experienced	Generalist/Extended tour guide	Multi-day coach tours
Marie	55	Some experience	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
Mary	34	Some experience	Heritage guide	Battlefield memorial
Nancy	46	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Architectural attraction
Nathalia	51	Very experienced	Generalist/Extended tour guide	Multi-day coach tours
Nelson	53	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
Olivia	58	Some experience	Generalist/Extended tour guide	Small group driving tours
Oscar	56	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
Paul	62	Very experienced	City/Heritage guide	Transport museum
Paula	43	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Whisky heritage attraction
Piper	23	New guide	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
Rhona	65	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Whisky heritage attraction
Richard	57	Very experienced	City guide/Heritage guide	Architectural attraction
Sarah	62	Very experienced	Generalist/Extended tour guide	Multi-day coach tours
Simon	43	Very experienced	City/Heritage guide	Architectural attraction
Terence	70	Very experienced	Generalist/Extended tour guide	Small group driving tours
Thomas	38	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
Tim	40	Some experience	Heritage guide	Historical attraction
Vicky	56	Very experienced	Generalist/Extended tour guide	Multi-day coach tours
Viv	68	Very experienced	Heritage guide	Maritime attraction

**Table 2: Categorisation of incidents**

Types of knowledge asymmetry incidents	Number of incidents	Description of information context and tourists' knowledge	Examples of incidents
Probing incidents	23	Guides are questioned by inquiring tourists who seek answers to questions stemming from curiosity or stirred up by stimuli during the tour.	<p>Tourist on bus tour asks follow-up questions about a historical event the guide is talking about, the guide does not know the answer, feels embarrassed, avoids answering by moving on to another topic.</p> <p>Historical city tour guide is asked a question about slavery in the city on mentioning the topic in comparison with another city, does not have the relevant information on hand and feels flustered. Offers to follow up later but does not, subsequently avoids mentioning the topic.</p> <p>Tourists on a bus tour asking questions about geology, guide uses memory aids and stalls to search through materials he has on the bus to provide more in-depth information.</p> <p>Tourist curious about technical aspects of the whisky distilling process asks questions the guide does not know the answer to, guide offers to follow up and asks a colleague for help.</p> <p>Pedantic tourist trying to catch out a guide in a stately home by asking awkward, unusual questions about an item on display, guide uses humour to divert the tourist's attention and moves on.</p> <p>Tourists asking questions about a specific Scottish clan a historical battlefield visitor centre, guide offers to follow up, seeks help from specialist research team on site and follows up with answers by email.</p>
Learning incidents	58	Guides learn from expert tourists who share factual specialist information, personal histories, experiences, and useful trivia.	<p>Tourist shares family history with guide who then relates this to known historical facts on a guided tour.</p> <p>Visitor who was formerly employed at the now historical visitor attraction shares personal stories from his time at the attraction, encouraged by the guide.</p> <p>Tourist with beer brewing experience offers new insights during guided whisky distillery tour, guide welcomes the additional perspective.</p> <p>Tourist with specialist knowledge of celadon ware glazing explains a specific firing sequence to guide at arts museum, guide has been drawing on the information since.</p> <p>Tourist with cultural knowledge of Vietnamese religious symbols corrects guide at a historical attraction about the symbolism of a religious statue.</p> <p>Canadian visitor with background in forestry talking about differences between trees and woodlands in Scotland and in Canada.</p>

			Visitor – professor of geology – correcting guide’s information given during a bus tour regarding geological make-up of a particular area the tour passed.
Negotiation incidents	26	Guides are challenged by misguided tourists who possess subjectively superior knowledge in the form of misremembered facts, incorrect assumptions, strong opinions, values, ideas and beliefs.	<p>Tourist with strong religious beliefs aggressively challenging established facts about ancient history at a geological visitor centre, guide refers to ‘facts we have here’.</p> <p>Tourists coming to a genealogical visitor centre with partially correct or incorrect historical or geographical facts laden with emotional meanings and links, guides provide contextual information rather than specific ancestral data.</p> <p>Visitor at a distillery convinced about the use of peated malt in the whisky argues with the guide, who subsequently checks with colleagues but unable to convince the visitor, they part ways.</p> <p>Visitor at a wildlife centre convinced that birds only nest on trees, guide tries unsuccessfully to convince her that the wading bird population in the reserve nests on the ground.</p> <p>Tourist at a Scottish castle misremembering historical factors about Mary Queen of Scots, guide probes for the origins of the misinformation and corrects the visitor.</p> <p>Tourist at distillery takes cues from whisky advertising believing that water is a key ingredient for the taste, guide corrects the misconception.</p>



(Source: Figure by Authors)