



MANAGING SCOPE CREEP IN INTEGRATED TOURISM PROJECTS: A GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Scope creep is traditionally framed as a technical failure in project management; however, in complex urban development projects, it is often shaped by governance and institutional dynamics. This study examines scope evolution in large-scale integrated tourism resort projects through a multi-site qualitative case study of five resorts in China. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, document analysis and thematic analysis. The findings reveal three distinct scope outcomes: rational scope increase, irrational scope creep, and scope suspension. These outcomes are influenced by governance configurations, power distribution, and competing institutional logics, particularly the interaction between administrative, market, and professional perspectives. The results highlight that scope changes are not merely technical deviations but are embedded within broader governance structures and stakeholder dynamics. This study contributes to the literature on project planning and governance by introducing a governance-based perspective to understand the dynamics of scope changes in complex development projects. It extends scope management theory by introducing a more detailed typology of scope outcomes and by integrating institutional and stakeholder perspectives into project management. Furthermore, empirical evidence from an integrated tourism resort project in China strengthens the understanding of how governance structures and power relations influence scope evolution in large-scale projects involving multiple stakeholders.

Keywords: scope creep, governance, institutional logics, tourism resort development

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INTRODUCTION

Large-scale urban development projects, particularly integrated tourism resorts, are characterised by high complexity, multiple stakeholders, and evolving project requirements. One of the most persistent challenges in such projects is scope creep, defined as the uncontrolled expansion of project scope beyond the original project scope (Kerzner, 2017). Traditionally, scope creep has been attributed to ineffective project management practices, such as poor documentation or inadequate stakeholder control (Project Management Institute, 2021).

However, this perspective is increasingly inadequate for explaining scope dynamics in large-scale developments. In practice, project scope is frequently influenced by wider governance arrangements, institutional demands, and competing stakeholder interests (Flyvbjerg, 2014). This is particularly evident in integrated tourism resort developments, where public authorities, private developers, and consultants operate within a complex governance environment shaped by stakeholder interests, market demands, and regulatory changes. These interactions require ongoing coordination to align strategic objectives with project delivery (Walker, 2010; Bourne & Walker, 2008). Such conditions intensify scope management challenges and frequently trigger scope changes. These changes often result in project delays, cost overruns, and inefficient resource utilisation due to inadequate requirement identification and weak stakeholder communication. While social phenomena are inherently complex, understanding them is essential for assessing stakeholder acceptance, which directly affects tourism management (Mohamad & Mohamed, 2018).

In Malaysia, tourism development operates within a multi-level planning framework involving federal, state, and local authorities. This framework often facing coordination challenges, institutional fragmentation, and evolving regulatory demands (Zulkefli et al., 2022; Marzuki, 2010). Although this study is based on cases in China, the governance-based scope dynamics identified offer relevant insights for Malaysian tourism planning and project delivery. Despite the increasing importance of tourism-led developments, empirical studies on scope creep in this context remain limited, as existing research has predominantly focused on general construction and infrastructure projects, with less attention to the governance complexity and market responsiveness that are specific to tourism developments. Accordingly, this study examines how project scope evolves in large-scale integrated tourism resort developments in China, focusing on the role of governance factors and stakeholder dynamics in shaping scope changes during project implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Causes and Effects of Scope Creep

Scope creep refers to the uncontrolled expansion of project scope without formal approval and is particularly prevalent in large and complex projects involving

multiple stakeholders and high levels of uncertainty. One of the primary causes is an unclear scope definition, where ambiguity at the early project stage increases the likelihood of scope changes during execution (Dumont et al., 1997). Empirical studies confirm that poorly defined scope is a key contributor to project delays and cost overruns (Amoatey & Anson, 2017). Another significant factor is changes in client requirements, as evolving customer expectations and diverse user needs increase project complexity, particularly in tourism and resort developments (Faulkner et al., 2003). External stakeholder interventions, including those from government agencies and local communities, may further alter project objectives and expand project scope over time (McAdam, 1999).

In addition, unforeseen risks play a critical role, especially in complex or “soft” projects where uncertainty cannot be adequately managed using traditional approaches (Khan, 2006). Stakeholder conflicts, arising from misaligned goals, ineffective communication, and unclear roles, also contribute to uncontrolled scope expansion (Sharma, 2006). The impacts of scope creep are substantial, often resulting in time delays, cost overruns, and reduced quality. Amoatey and Anson (2017) report that scope creep can increase project costs by up to 30%, while negatively affecting overall project performance and stakeholder satisfaction.

Scope Management in Tourism Development Projects

The primary issue in dealing with scope management is the high complexity and varying environmental conditions (Ahmed & Jawad, 2022). In resort and retreat developments, scope management is further complicated by the need to prioritise customer experience and service quality. Tourism is one of the key sectors contributing to Malaysia’s economic development, and the Malaysian government has consistently demonstrated its commitment to fostering the industry’s growth through strategic planning and policy support (Abdul Latip et al., 2020). Tourism projects involve multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, developers, local communities, and tourists, whose diverse and often competing interests increase the complexity of scope management and the risk of scope creep (Marnada et al., 2022). Misalignment of stakeholder requirements and frequent interventions, particularly by top management, further contribute to uncontrolled scope changes. To address these challenges, a collaborative team-oriented management approach combined with structured service design methodologies, such as Resort Service Design (RSD), has been recommended to enhance resource allocation and minimise inefficiencies arising from scope changes (Potashova, 2015).

Although existing literature provides valuable insights into the causes and impacts of scope creep, most studies conceptualise it as a technical or managerial issue, focusing on tools, processes, and control mechanisms. Limited attention has been given to the governance and institutional dimensions that

shape scope decisions in complex development projects. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical research examining scope dynamics specifically within integrated tourism development projects, where multiple stakeholders operate under competing priorities. The interaction between administrative, market, and professional interests remains underexplored.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative multiple case study approach, which is appropriate for investigating complex and context-dependent phenomena such as scope dynamics in large-scale development projects. A multi-site embedded case study design was employed to allow for cross-case comparison while capturing variations across different project contexts.

Five integrated tourism resort projects in China were selected as case studies based on clear criteria to ensure comparability and contextual diversity. All selected projects are large-scale, mixed-use tourism developments that integrate hospitality, recreation, entertainment, retail, and supporting infrastructure, while also being relatively comparable in terms of investment values, land areas, and stages of development. This uniformity in project type and scale provides a consistent basis for examining scope management practices across cases. The projects were selected from diverse geographical locations in China to capture variations in economic conditions, market demand, and regional planning policies. Differences in governance contexts were also considered by selecting projects operating under distinct administrative and institutional frameworks, including varying levels of local government involvement, approval procedures, regulatory requirements, and stakeholder coordination mechanisms.

The selection of integrated tourism resort projects in China as case studies was informed not only by their scale and complexity, but also by their comparative relevance to other emerging tourism economies such as Malaysia. Both China and Malaysia share similar characteristics in tourism-oriented development, including multi-level governance structures, public-private collaboration, and the involvement of multiple regulatory agencies in planning and implementation (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia, 2020). In Malaysia, tourism developments are similarly shaped by overlapping institutional responsibilities and stakeholder coordination challenges, which often influence project scope and delivery (Zulkefli et al., 2022). Accordingly, the Chinese cases provide comparative insights into governance-driven scope evolution that may offer transferable lessons for tourism planning and project governance in the Malaysian context.

Overall, these criteria enable the study to examine how scope management evolves across different contexts while maintaining sufficient comparability for cross-case analysis. To complement the case study selection, a purposive sampling strategy was also employed to identify respondents directly

involved in project planning, design, and management, ensuring that the data collected reflects perspectives grounded in relevant experience and knowledge regarding scope evolution and project governance practices.

A total of 12 respondents across five case study projects were interviewed, comprising project managers, design consultants, and client representatives. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling, a widely recognised approach in qualitative research that enables the identification of individuals with relevant knowledge, expertise, and direct experience related to the phenomenon being investigated (Patton, 2015). This selection was based on their involvement in scope planning, design coordination, and project implementation, ensuring the data obtained was both in-depth and relevant.

To ensure balanced representation and capture diverse professional perspectives, the distribution of respondents was determined by the project complexity and stakeholder structure. Specifically, each project involved at least two key respondents representing the client and consultant perspectives, while projects with higher complexity or broader stakeholder involvement included an additional project manager. This approach aligns with the principles of multiple-case study research, which emphasises the importance of gathering diverse sources of evidence and perspectives to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings (Yin, 2018). This arrangement enabled a more comprehensive understanding of scope evolution and project governance practices, encompassing both general approaches and those specific to the project context.

The sample size of 12 respondents is considered adequate for qualitative research, as it allows for data saturation, where no new themes or insights emerge from additional data collection (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). This enhances the depth and reliability of the findings. Data were collected from multiple sources to enable methodological triangulation, including semi-structured interviews on scope management practices, governance structures, and scope creep challenges; document analysis of planning approvals, design revisions, and project reports; and secondary sources, such as policy documents and organisational records, to provide contextual background.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the transcripts serving as the primary data source for analysis. The collected data, including interview transcripts and supporting documents, were analysed using an interpretative thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns and establish relationships between empirical findings and the study's theoretical framework.

The coding process was conducted in three stages. First, open coding was used to identify key ideas and generate initial codes from the data. Second, axial coding was applied to group related codes into broader themes and examine their interrelationships. Finally, selective coding was undertaken to refine and consolidate these themes into higher-order categories for analysis. Theme

development involved repeated reviews of the transcripts and documents to identify recurring issues, contextual variations, and emerging patterns related to scope creep, governance structures, and stakeholder interactions. In addition, a cross-case synthesis was conducted to compare findings across the five cases, enabling the identification of common sources of scope creep as well as context-specific triggers. This comparative approach strengthened the analytical depth and enhanced the transferability of the findings to similar project settings.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this study are based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twelve key stakeholders representing the five project sites. In order to capture the divergent points of view and improve the strong interpretative latitude of data, the interviewees were purposefully selected from all the critical functions in the project value chain from beginning to end.

Beyond case-specific differences, the analysis reveals a set of recurring structural drivers shaping scope management across projects. Synthesizing the cross-case findings, distinct configurations of institutional logics are associated with different scope outcomes. In all five cases, scope management presents itself as a result of intricate and deep structural systems, rather than the absence of procedural mechanisms. The absence of governance structural power conflicts is a fundamental risk and remains in the subsurface. Operational logics, in both innovative and disruptive ways, impact growth and contribute to the misalignment of the system. Collectively, these cases illustrate that scope creep in resort projects produces both adaptive successes and costly failures, depending on how governance power, operational logic, and strategic cognition are aligned. These empirical contrasts provide concrete lessons for practitioners regarding when scope flexibility creates value and when it undermines project sustainability.

These findings imply that effective scope management involves understanding and first attending to the structural factors influencing how the project gets governed. *Scope management style* refers to the manner in which project scope is planned, controlled, adjusted, and governed throughout the project lifecycle. It reflects the decision-making approach, level of stakeholder coordination, governance structure, and degree of flexibility applied in responding to emerging project demands and uncertainties. In complex development projects, scope management style influences whether scope changes are strategically integrated, poorly controlled, or partially deferred.

In this study, scope management style is understood through three forms based on decision logic, governance interactions, and scope outcomes. First, an adaptive and strategically aligned style refers to scope decisions that are deliberately introduced through stakeholder coordination and market-oriented considerations. These decisions lead to *rational scope increase*, whereby scope

expansion is deliberately introduced to enhance project value and competitiveness. Second, a reactive and weakly coordinated style often results in *irrational scope creep*, characterised by unplanned changes, misalignment, and inefficiencies. Third, a constrained or compromised management style may lead to *scope suspension*, where intended project elements are omitted or postponed due to governance conflicts, resource limitations, or institutional barriers. These styles demonstrate that scope management is not merely a technical control function, but a governance-driven process shaped by institutional and stakeholder dynamics. To systematically compare scope governance patterns across the five cases, a cross-case comparison is presented.

Table 1: Cross-Case Comparison of Scope Management and Scope Outcomes

Case	Governance Power Structure	Dominant Logic	Scope Management Style	Scope Outcome
Hangzhou	Fragmented/Weak Integration	Professional	Scope suspension	Scope contraction
Rizhao	Owner dominated	Administrative	Coercive governance	Irrational creep
Wuhan	Diffused fragmented	Operational anxiety	Reactive expansion	Resource-driven creep
Jiaxing	Market-driven	Market	Adaptive informal	Rational expansion
Zhoushan	Constraint-driven	Professional	Conscervative governance	Scope lock-in

Table 1 compares scope management styles and their corresponding scope outcomes across the five cases, illustrating how different governance configurations shape the trajectory of project scope. The comparison shows that scope management practices are closely associated with eventual scope outcomes and are influenced by the underlying governance power structures and dominant institutional logics. Beyond the case-specific variations, the cross-case analysis identifies recurring structural drivers that consistently influence scope decisions across projects. By synthesising these findings, it becomes evident that distinct configurations of institutional logics and governance arrangements tend to produce different scope outcomes, ranging from contraction and lock-in to rational expansion and various forms of scope creep. Drawing from the cross-case patterns identified in Table 1, Figure 1 conceptualises the structural interactions through which governance configurations and institutional logics drive distinct scope management approaches and resulting scope outcomes.



Figure 1: Interaction of Structural Drivers in Scope Governance

Governance, Institutional, and Operational Mechanisms Shaping Scope Decisions and Evolution

In the context of resort tourism projects, scope changes cannot be adequately captured by the single term *scope creep*. The findings indicate that, beyond the conventional notion of scope expansion driven by additional requirements, three distinct forms of scope change are observed.

Forms of Scope Change and Underlying Mechanisms in Resort Tourism Projects

The findings indicate that scope changes in resort tourism projects extend beyond the traditional concept of *scope creep*. Three distinct forms rational scope expansion, irrational scope creep, and scope suspension are identified, each shaped by different governance, institutional, and operational mechanisms.

Rational Scope Expansion and Strategic Governance Alignment

Rational scope expansion is primarily driven by governance mechanisms that emphasise strategic alignment and market responsiveness. The findings show that project steering committees, investor directives, and senior management decisions play a critical role in approving scope enhancements that improve competitiveness and user experience. At the institutional level, tourism development policies and destination branding strategies further legitimise such expansions by encouraging innovation and experiential value creation.

Operationally, these changes are supported by structured feasibility assessments, stakeholder consultations, and iterative design processes. This suggests that rational scope expansion is not a deviation but an adaptive mechanism, where governance structures enable controlled flexibility in response to dynamic market conditions. This is evident in the operational phase of Jiaxing Senbo Resort, where themed activities and micro-innovations were introduced within feasible resource and professional boundaries. However, when market logic is based on overly optimistic assumptions or lacks governance constraints, it may lead to illogical scope decisions, as seen in the preparation phase of Senbo Wuhan, where workforce expansion exceeded realistic project needs

Irrational Scope Creep and Governance Deficiencies

Irrational scope creep is closely linked to weaknesses in governance and institutional control, where scope changes emerge without clear strategic justification or effective oversight. Unclear approval hierarchies, fragmented decision-making, and weak change-control procedures encourage uncontrolled scope growth, while inconsistent policy interpretation, inadequate resource planning, inaccurate cost estimation, and ineffective stakeholder communication further intensify cumulative and uncoordinated changes. This reflects how unchecked bureaucratic priorities can create conditions for irrational scope creep, as illustrated in the case of Rizhao Senbo Resort, where the decision to enforce an early opening without adequate operational readiness demonstrates how scope decisions became overly driven by administrative priorities rather than professional or operational considerations.

Scope Suspension and Institutional Misalignment

Scope suspension represents the deferment or omission of critical project components due to governance misalignment, shifting strategic priorities, and limited professional input. Unlike scope creep, it reflects a reduction in scope that may diminish project value and functionality. This is illustrated by Hangzhou Senbo Resort, where the brand-building function, originally a key strategic component, was excluded from the organisational structure and resource allocation, demonstrating how the marginalisation of professional judgement can compromise scope integrity and long-term project value.

Reconceptualising Scope Failure: Beyond Expansion to Omission

Collectively, these findings suggest that scope failure in resort tourism projects should be reconceptualised, as supported by existing literature on project governance and megaproject complexity. While traditional studies emphasise excessive scope expansion as the primary concern (Project Management Institute, 2021), emerging research highlights that scope failure also includes the omission or under-specification of critical project elements (Flyvbjerg, 2014). From a

governance perspective, both over-expansion and under-specification can be attributed to misaligned decision-making structures and ineffective governance frameworks (Too & Weaver, 2014). This is consistent with studies indicating that weak governance arrangements often lead to inconsistent scope decisions and reduced project performance. Institutionally, the presence of fragmented policies and inadequate coordination mechanisms further reinforces these challenges, particularly in complex, multi-actor environments such as tourism development projects (World Tourism Organization, 2018).

At the operational level, prior studies have shown that inadequate planning, ineffective communication, and resource constraints significantly contribute to scope instability and project inefficiencies (Kerzner, 2017; Project Management Institute, 2021). These factors can intensify both uncontrolled scope expansion and the unintended omission of critical project components. In line with this, scope failure should be understood as encompassing both excessive expansion (*irrational scope creep*) and insufficient delivery (*scope suspension*), highlighting the need for balanced governance, institutional alignment, and effective operational controls in managing scope evolution (Flyvbjerg, 2014; Too & Weaver, 2014).

The findings of this study indicate that *scope creep* in integrated tourism resort projects exhibits distinct characteristics compared to other project types such as information technology (IT), product development, service-based projects, and conventional construction. While scope changes in these sectors are typically driven by technical requirements, innovation, or service improvements, tourism projects are more strongly influenced by market trends, visitor expectations, branding strategies, regulatory requirements, and multiple stakeholder interests. Scope evolution in tourism developments frequently involves the addition of experiential and commercial elements, including entertainment facilities, retail spaces, and hospitality enhancements, to strengthen destination attractiveness and competitiveness.

Unlike projects with more centralised decision-making structures, tourism developments involve complex interactions among public authorities, private developers, consultants, and local communities. This multi-actor governance environment increases the likelihood of repeated scope adjustments as stakeholder priorities evolve over time, consistent with tourism development literature (Butler, 1980; Getz, 1986). The findings demonstrate that scope change in large-scale tourism resort projects should not be viewed solely as a technical project management failure, but rather as a governance- and institutionally driven process shaped by power relations, stakeholder dynamics, and competing institutional logics. The identification of rational scope increase, irrational scope creep, and scope suspension highlights the multifaceted nature of scope evolution, where adaptive and value-driven decisions coexist with governance weaknesses, misalignment, and ineffective stakeholder coordination. In this

regard, project control systems in Malaysia may benefit from adopting more adaptive governance mechanisms, including structured stakeholder engagement, clearer approval pathways, and early strategic alignment to better manage scope changes in large-scale tourism developments.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that scope change in large-scale integrated tourism resort projects cannot be adequately explained by the conventional concept of *scope creep* as a purely technical failure. Instead, scope evolution is shown to be a governance- and institutionally driven process shaped by power relations, stakeholder dynamics, and competing institutional logics. The identification of three scope outcomes, namely rational scope increase, irrational scope creep, and scope suspension highlights the multi-dimensional nature of scope change. While rational scope increase reflects adaptive and value-driven decision-making, irrational scope creep and scope suspension reveal the consequences of governance deficiencies, misalignment, and weak coordination among stakeholders. These findings suggest that scope failure should be reconceptualised to include not only excessive expansion but also the omission or deferment of critical project elements.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to project governance and planning literature by extending the understanding of scope dynamics beyond technical control mechanisms to include broader institutional and governance contexts. Practically, the findings underscore the need for stronger governance alignment, clearer decision-making structures, and improved stakeholder coordination to manage scope effectively in complex, multi-actor development environments. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its focus on five resort projects within a single national context. Future research may expand the scope to different geographical settings, employ mixed-methods approaches, or explore the quantitative validation of the identified scope typologies.

Overall, this study highlights that effective scope management in complex development projects requires not only technical competence but also robust governance mechanisms and institutional coherence to balance flexibility with control. Although this study is based on integrated tourism resort projects in China, the findings provide important insights for the Malaysian planning context. Large-scale developments in Malaysia, particularly mixed-use and tourism-oriented projects, are similarly characterised by multi-stakeholder involvement, including local authorities, developers, consultants, and investors. Scope creep in Malaysian projects should not be viewed solely as a technical issue but as a governance challenge shaped by institutional interactions.

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