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**Master Thesis**

**Beyond Borders: Unveiling Third-Party Actors on Co-Creating Customer Tourism Experiences**

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## ABSTRACT

Value co-creation is a topic that has been explored in several service contexts from different perspectives. This study focuses on experience co-creation in the tourism framework, taking a closer look at the role of third parties. It aims at investigating the influence of third-party actors on the co-creation of customer tourism service experience. The main objectives of this research are to identify who these third parties are, when they influence the focal tourist, and how they influence him/her. The phases considered for the tourist journey are motivation, information search, evaluation, decision, stay at the destination, satisfaction, and sharing.

For the collection of data, a qualitative approach is used. Semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams were conducted. A sample of 20 informants was attained. The findings of this study show that friends, online communities, and the internet (more understood as Google) influence the focal tourist most during the pre-experience phase. However, during the experience in situ, the key influences on the focal tourist are local communities and face-to-face interactions with other tourists. Finally, findings suggest that during the post-experience, the major roles are played by friends, other tourists, and the local population.

## Table of content

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b><i>I</i></b>
<b>List of figures.....</b>	<b><i>IV</i></b>
<b>List of tables.....</b>	<b><i>IV</i></b>
<b>I. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b><i>1</i></b>
<b>II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b><i>5</i></b>
2.1 The exchange paradigm and the birth of the value co-creation concept.....	<b><i>5</i></b>
2.2 Co-creation: Bridging Value and Experience .....	<b><i>7</i></b>
2.3 The Tourism context .....	<b><i>8</i></b>
2.4 The customer journey .....	<b><i>8</i></b>
2.5 The third parties in the experience co-creation .....	<b><i>9</i></b>
2.5.1 Shifting perspective: third-party voices in co-creation .....	<b><i>9</i></b>
2.5.2 Third parties' roles and their influences on the customer and service provider .....	<b><i>10</i></b>
2.5.3 Who are these third parties? .....	<b><i>13</i></b>
2.6 The place attachment and revisit intention .....	<b><i>20</i></b>
2.7 Critics of the literature on the co-creation process .....	<b><i>21</i></b>
<b>III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b><i>23</i></b>
3.1 Conceptual model .....	<b><i>23</i></b>
3.2 Motivation .....	<b><i>23</i></b>
3.3 Information search .....	<b><i>24</i></b>
3.4 Evaluation.....	<b><i>25</i></b>
3.5 Decision.....	<b><i>25</i></b>
3.6 Stay at the destination .....	<b><i>25</i></b>
3.7 Satisfaction .....	<b><i>26</i></b>
3.8 Sharing.....	<b><i>27</i></b>
3.9 Research question and research objectives .....	<b><i>28</i></b>
<b>IV. METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b><i>29</i></b>
4.1 Data collection.....	<b><i>29</i></b>
4.2 Sampling .....	<b><i>31</i></b>
4.3 Data analysis .....	<b><i>31</i></b>
<b>V. FINDINGS .....</b>	<b><i>33</i></b>
5.1 Sample description .....	<b><i>33</i></b>
5.2 Motivation .....	<b><i>35</i></b>

5.3 Information search and evaluation .....	37
5.4 Decision .....	43
5.5 Stay at the destination .....	45
5.6 Satisfaction and sharing .....	49
<i>VI. DISCUSSION</i> .....	54
6.1 Summary of the study .....	54
6.2 Interpretation of the findings and comparison with the literature.....	54
6.3 Theoretical and managerial contributions .....	58
<i>VII. CONCLUSION</i> .....	61
7.1 Limitations of the study .....	61
7.2 Future research.....	61
<i>BIBLIOGRAPHY</i> .....	63
<i>APPENDIX</i> .....	80

## List of figures

Figure 1: A typology of generic actor roles (Ekman et al., 2016).....	11
Figure 2: An actor-to-actor exchange service system and roles of the generic actors (Ekman et al., 2016).....	11
Figure 3: Structural Model of Intercultural Interactions of International Tourist (Yoo & Sohn, 2003).....	16
Figure 4: Conceptual framework (adapted from Campos et al., 2018 ; Hamilton et al., 2021)...	23

## List of tables

Table 1: Overview of the selected measured variables with a 5-Likert scale .....	30
Table 2: Demographic profile and background of the tourist experience of the 20 participants .....	33
Table 3: General satisfaction with the others' inputs/information.....	41
Tabelle 4: Third parties' influence on focal tourist's decision.....	43
Table 5: Satisfaction of tourists with interactions on-site .....	48
Tabelle 6: Level of satisfaction with the overall tourist experience .....	49
Table 7: Participants' willingness to spread word-of-mouth (WOM/e-WOM).....	52
Table 8: Results of participant's willingness to revisit their chosen destination.....	53
Table 9: Findings' resume .....	54

# I. INTRODUCTION

Value co-creation (VCC) is a topic that has generated a growing interest in the academic and practice worlds, as it implies a customer-oriented approach and collaboration between multiple stakeholders. In this context, one of the most significant contributions has come from a study conducted by Vargo and Lusch (2004) on a service-dominant logic (SDL) of marketing. Particularly, they have focused on exploring different aspects of value co-creation, such as customer relationships, stakeholder interactions, consumer centrism, co-design, and experiential marketing (Vargo & Lush, 2004 ; Ranjan & Read, 2016). Indeed, one of the key ideas of service-dominant logic is that “*the customer is always a co-creator of value*” (Yi & Gong, 2013, p. 1279). Nevertheless, the recent surge in fascination with value co-creation is attributed to a broader understanding of the value concept: value co-creation transcends the direct exchange between a service provider and a customer. Value emerges in networks (Black & Gallan, 2015). Therefore, the value co-creation research focus has been shifted from the traditional relationship between the main customer and service supplier to understanding the engagement of third parties – a broader network of partners (other service providers, other customers, peers, family, and friends) (Sitaloppi & Vargo, 2017 ; De Keyser et al., 2019 ; Johns & Davey, 2019). Despite researchers’ and practitioners’ awareness that interactions between customers and service providers extend beyond one-on-one exchanges, little attention has been given to the study of third-party types and their influence on dyadic encounters (customer-service supplier relationship). Indeed, a significant gap in the service literature relates to the influence of these third parties on the focal customer and consequently on the service firm (Abboud et al., 2021).

Over the last few decades, the concept of experience has emerged as a focal point of interest for both service researchers as well as managers (Jaakkola et al., 2015a). To explore the third-party actor types and their influence on the focal customer, for this master thesis, it is, hence, interesting to introduce the concept of service experience co-creation because it implies the co-creation between customers, firms, and a wide network of actors (Jaakkola et al., 2015a). It also requires stronger customer engagement (Wu & Gao, 2019). Experience and value are two linked concepts as customers attribute value to experiences while recognizing that the primary outcomes stem from the co-creation of experiences by both customers and firms to obtain value (Buonincontri et al., 2017). When conceptualizing a co-created service experience, both

SDL and service logic emphasize the personalized and context-specific nature of the experience, shaped by interactions with others (Jaakkola et al., 2015a).

Indeed, customers currently engage with companies through various touchpoints across multiple channels and media platforms, which also means that firms could have less control over the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In the literature, the concept of customer service experience evolved, and the attention shifted from the unique, extraordinary experience of the focal customer to a heightened stress on experience as a collective, co-created phenomenon (Jaakkola et al., 2015a). So, nowadays, numerous customers' choices take place within an interactive and collaborative context of social connections and societal considerations. Customers do not just take input from close friends or their families, however, they also consider the opinions of anonymous individuals, such as influencers, social friends, etc. (Hamilton et al., 2021). Therefore, from a co-creation perspective, the customer experience can be viewed as the result of a customer's engagement with other entities in a larger ecosystem, acknowledging the customer's involvement in the co-construction of the experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In alternative terms, the service experience is more and more co-created through interactions among the customer, service provider(s), other customers, and/or other stakeholders (Jaakkola et al., 2015b).

Furthermore, this thesis approaches the experience co-creation process through the customer journey to understand at every stage which actors can influence the focal customer. Inspired by the articles of Hamilton et al. (2021) and Campos et al. (2018) the customer journey is divided into seven phases: motivation, information search, evaluation, decision, stay at the destination, satisfaction, and sharing.

To better understand which actors influence the focal customer, and to examine the mechanisms through which such influence occurs, the tourism context is chosen.

First of all, the post-modern tourist (tourist after the 2009 economic crisis) always looks for a memorable experience and strives to participate in the service's production to best achieve its expectations, instead of just consuming goods and services (Dekhili & Hallem, 2016; Shaw et al., 2011). Second, identifying the third-party actors (in the wide sense) who can affect the touristic customer experience can help the firms streamline the service experience co-creation and understand which inputs coming from these "other actors" can enhance innovation, learning, and strategic planning (Jaakkola et al., 2015a). Indeed, firms that privilege interactions with customers and the other actors who can influence the service outcome can

acquire a competitive advantage by offering a better service and an enriched customer experience. Co-creation allows all market actors (customers, service suppliers, network partners) to achieve their desired outcomes through interdependency and collaboration between them (Karpen et al., 2015).

Finally, considering the emerging importance of social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, etc.), customers (tourists), today, do not just ask for advice from their families and close friends, but they can interact with other anonymous people. The way of doing marketing has therefore changed. Before the digital revolution, marketers could influence consumers' decisions through traditional advertising (one-way communication) and could stimulate word-of-mouth between their friends and neighbors. Now, marketers should consider that consumers look for interactions beyond geographical boundaries. Indeed, the tourist's experience is divided into more steps (Pre-experience- Motivation, Information search, evaluation, and decision; Experience on-site; Post-experience- satisfaction and sharing). In each stage, the customers socialize with different "actors" in various ways. Furthermore, this study can help tourist marketers identify the third-party actors who may influence the tourists along their experience (journey) and who can also influence the company's marketing strategy in terms of communication as well as online and in-store technology (Campos et al., 2018 ; Hamilton et al., 2021).

Therefore, the main research objective of this master thesis is to explore the influence of third-party actors on the co-creation of customer tourism service experience.

This objective is followed by three sub-questions: who are the third-party actors? When do they influence the focal customer? And how do they influence the customer?

The research questions cover an important gap in the literature and consider a new topic's perspective. The majority of existing studies (e.g., Dekhili & Hallem, 2016 ; Grisseemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012) on tourist literature focus on the main relationship between the customer and the service provider in the value co-creation (Shaw et al., 2011). However, other empirical studies, such as Grove & Fisk (1997) and Colm et al. (2017) limit their investigation by focusing on the effect of other customers on the focal customer (Abboud et al., 2021).

This study aims to reinforce the tourism literature on the co-creation of experience and strengthen the recent point of view that tourist firms should think more about the tourism and travel industry in terms of experiences and networks. A significant number of managers are



hesitant to let go of traditional practices and techniques (Sfandla & Björk, 2013). Then, these research's findings allow tourist firms to adapt their strategy according to the experience phase, enhancing tourist satisfaction.

In conclusion, this master's thesis establishes the groundwork for a comprehensive exploration of the third-party actors in the service experience co-creation process within the dynamic context of the tourism sector. Recognizing the intricate web of relationships and collaborations that extend beyond the focal interaction between the customer and the service supplier, this empirical research endeavors to shed light on the diverse actors who contribute to and shape the customer's experience. To achieve the research objectives, a qualitative method is chosen. Semi-structured interviews were conducted considering a sample of 20 individuals.

This thesis opens with a literature review of the topic. In addition, the conceptual framework is presented and explained. Then, the methodology is described, and the reader is informed about the data collection, sampling method, and phases of the study. Moreover, the findings are exposed and discussed. Finally, the limitations of the research and future research propositions are pointed out.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, seven sub-chapters are presented. First of all, the origins and the birth of the value co-creation concept as well as of the experience co-creation are elucidated. Then, the tourism context of this master's thesis is explained. Thereafter, the definition of the customer journey and its importance in the studied subject are illustrated. Further, an exploration of the fragmented literature about third-party actors in the services and tourism sectors is necessary to fully grasp the dynamics at play within the experience co-creation process. Moreover, the concepts of "place attachment" and "revisit intention" are described and the influence of the first one on the second one is synthesized. Finally, the last point resumes the critics of the literature on the co-creation topic, to be aware of its dark side.

### **2.1 The exchange paradigm and the birth of the value co-creation concept**

Since the 1980s, before introducing the concept of value co-creation, "exchange" has been a pillar topic in marketing for several years. The American Marketing Association (AMA) used the word "exchange" as a key term to define marketing (1985): "Marketing is ... to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals" (Sheth & Usley, 2007, p. 302). According to Kotler (1972), "The core concept of marketing is the transaction [exchange]. A transaction is the exchange of values between two parties... Marketing is specifically concerned with how [exchanges] are created, stimulated, facilitated, and valued" (Kotler, 1972, p. 50 ; Anderson et al., 1999, p. 8). Marketing exchanges often blend utilitarian (economic) as well as intangible (symbolic) elements. These exchanges may occur within the confines of business organizations or externally (Sheth & Usley, 2007).

The classical and neoclassical study of marketing (1800-1920) rests upon the distribution and exchange of goods and manufactured items. Furthermore, value was incorporated into physical products through the production process. In the first half of the twentieth century (1900-1950), the definition of marketing is subjected to an evolution. The attention was on the transaction or output and how institutions engaging in marketing functions increase the value of tangible products as well. This emphasis on functions allowed the introduction of the concept of operant resources (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Operant resources refer to human resources such as skills, capabilities, and knowledge of employees (Madhavaram & Hunt, 2008). During a portion of the second half of the twentieth century (1950-1980), a clear distinction between the act of selling and marketing is highlighted. Marketing embraced the

idea that businesses should satisfy customers' needs through products and all things linked with creating, delivering, and consuming them. The integrated value must possess utility (Levitt, 2004). With this emerging idea of marketing, the exchange paradigm took more and more importance, affirming that "exchange is not an end in itself" (Houston & Gassenheimer, 1987, p. 10) and that "end is need satisfaction" (Houston et al., 1992, p. 131).

In 2004, AMA changed the definition of marketing replacing the word "exchange" with "value creation". Marketers have started to understand and study marketing from a new perspective. This can be considered the most significant difference between the 1985 and the 2004 AMA marketing definitions (Sheth & Uslay, 2007). Indeed, during the 1990s and continuing into the 2000s, the concept of value creation generated a growing interest in the management and marketing literature (Andreu et al., 2010 ; Grönroos, 2008). The predominant school of thought affirming that value for customers is given by the physical products that are manufactured by firms has been questioned by another emerging point of view (Grönroos, 2008). Vargo and Lusch (2004) theorized what is called Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) which puts at the center of the attention the intangibility, exchange processes, and relationships. The authors specified that this logic is customer-oriented, which means that the customers are not passive actors who just consume the service but collaborate with the firms to satisfy their needs. This indicates that value is determined by and jointly created with the customer rather than being ingrained in the output (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Furthermore, the focus shifted from a good-oriented view to service-dominant logic. Researchers therefore started to study the relationship between firms and customers from another perspective: interaction and dialog are considered the pillars of that relationship (Payne et al., 2008 ; Aarikka-Stenroos & Jakkola, 2012), and see customers as creators of value for themselves (Grönroos, 2008).

Following this new literature wave on value co-creation, co-creation is studied from different standpoints.

Indeed, to extend the concept of value co-creation, an intriguing aspect to consider is that value co-creation can be explored through a customer's cultural perspective. This means that consumption is deeply rooted in symbolism and culture and customers attribute subjective meanings to products and services. This dynamic interplay between consumers and companies has given goods and services attractiveness (Galvagno & Dalli, 2014 ; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Another field where value co-creation has raised interest is innovation. In this context, co-creation is interpreted as a process of collaboration and exchange between

companies and customers. According to Zwass (2010), value co-creation within virtual settings is facilitated through a technology platform that actively engages customers, initiatives by businesses/communities to foster co-creation activities, or endeavors where customers use their resources to generate value (Fan & Luo, 2020). However, as attention shifts toward the correlation between the service offering and the customer's environment, the concept of value-in-use has gained more prominence (Hansen, 2019).

## **2.2 Co-creation: Bridging Value and Experience**

According to the SDL literature, value is conceptualized as value-in-use. This perspective suggests value emerges when a customer consumes the product/service. Consequently, customers perceive and establish value, characterized as “value-in-use”. From the customer standpoint, the term “value-in-use” is understood as a journey of personal experiences, giving birth in the literature to the notion of “value in the experience”. Both value-in-use and value in the experience are correlated with the construct of value co-creation. The level of a customer's involvement in cooperation with the service supplier and other actors can influence value co-creation. On the other hand, the concept of value in the experience emphasizes that value co-creation depends on the integration of other actors and resources. It constitutes a part of the co-created value of the service process at any given time (Lee et al., 2023). “The experience is the origin of value” (Lee et al., 2023, p. 524). In other words, customers give value to experiences and that value is the main result of the experience co-creation principally determined by customers and firms. This explains why the constructs of value and experience are strictly linked (Buonincontri et al., 2017). Co-creation experience emerges as the cornerstone of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

In light of what has been previously explained, in this master thesis, the customer experience is therefore viewed from a co-creation perspective. It is defined as the outcome of a customer's interactions with other entities within a wider ecosystem, where the customer co-builds his own experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In experience co-creation, high-quality interactions are the key factors that empower customers to co-create distinctive experiences with the company (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Indeed, the recent evolution of economics and marketing literature, especially regarding Experiential Marketing, highlights that customer value is derived from the experience. Customer value does not provide physical outputs but transmits emotions to the customers (Gentile et al., 2007).

## **2.3 The Tourism context**

The tourism context is chosen for several reasons. First of all, tourism stands as one of the earliest examples of the experience economy (Buonincontri et al., 2017). It means that creating experiences is extremely important for firms to have the possibility to differentiate themselves to acquire a competitive advantage (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Indeed, tourists always look for memorable and unique experiences (Dekhili & Hallem, 2016), and touristic experiences require more and more active participation from the tourist and his engagement to co-create his own experience (Campos et al., 2016). Therefore, offering standardized services in the touristic context, where the experience is highly immersive, is a contradiction (Dekhili & Hallem, 2016).

Additionally, tourism is an interesting context to study and analyze the co-creation of an experience because tourists interact with different people (Prebensen & Foss, 2011) “during the process of planning, buying, enjoying, and recalling a tourist journey” (Prebensen et al., 2013, p. 910). The co-creation of experiences surpasses conventional notions of tourist-destination interactions. These interactions encompass various entities such as travel agents, tour operators, travel guides, etc. (Chathoth et al., 2014). Specifically, tourists assume a more proactive role in shaping their journey, engaging with tourism service providers at the destination, approaching other tourists, as well as choosing how to fulfill all of their desires. In this context, a successful tourist experience co-creation hinges on the active involvement of tourists and tourism service providers, who collaborate to enhance their offerings. This collaborative effort results in increased value for both tourists and tourism destinations (Buonincontri et al., 2017).

## **2.4 The customer journey**

The primary goal of monitoring customer interactions is to comprehend how an experience can be enhanced for the customer during the “customer decision-making process” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The customer decision-making process is linked to the concept of the customer journey. Inspiring by the article of Hamilton and colleagues (2021), for this empirical study it is interesting to introduce the term “social customer journey”. It refers to the path to purchase of a customer, specifically incorporating the significant role that social others (traveling companions) play throughout the entire journey. The authors emphasize the significance of “traveling companions” who engage with the decision-maker across one or more stages of the journey (Hamilton et al., 2021). As is already mentioned in the introduction chapter, the customer journey presents seven phases: motivation, information

search, evaluation, decision, stay at the destination, satisfaction, and sharing. This path fits with a possible travel decision-making process, which also involves the following main steps: idea formation, information search, evaluation of the alternatives, and final decision (Maria Nascimento Cunha, 2019). These phases can be regrouped into three principal stages of the co-creation process: before travel (before consumption), during stay at the destination (during consumption), and after the travel (after consumption) (Campos et al., 2018).

In each stage of the customer journey, tourists are involved in the co-creation of experiences physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Certain interactions that occur are planned, while others are spontaneous. It depends on the specific context and environment. Moreover, some interactions are formal, involving a documented agreement between parties (e.g., a hotel owner and a guest), while others are informal (e.g., no-planned encounter between two tourists). Interactions are the cornerstone of the tourists' experience co-creation process. It means that interactions link together all the actors who influence the tourist experience (Campos et al., 2018). Indeed, as society is more informed, connected, and acknowledgeable thanks to technology and free access to social media, multiple stakeholders are contemporarily together connected (Neuhofer & Buhalis, 2014). Researchers know the traditional customer-service provider relationship is not the only interaction during a customer journey (Abboud et al., 2021).

## **2.5 The third parties in the experience co-creation**

### *2.5.1 Shifting perspective: third-party voices in co-creation*

In the wide literature on co-creation, researchers and practitioners agree that value/experience co-creation implies the involvement of customers and companies, allowing customers to co-build the service experience according to their exigencies. However, the definition of co-creation has been adjusted because co-creation experts have recognized the implications of other actors (third parties) in the process (Rubio et al., 2020). Indeed, co-creation has been rebaptized as the construct that delineates how involved actors behave, interact, experience, utilize, and assess propositions within the context they are part of (Ranjan & Read, 2016). Therefore, it is interesting to introduce the term “service ecosystem”, which represents a community of individuals that coexist within the same environment and interact as a system. Ecosystems lead to a network of interactions between individuals as well as between individuals and the environment (Alexander et al., 2018). This notion of “network” found its roots towards the end of the nineties, when some researchers, such as Gummeson (2004),

identified one of the most important problems related to relationship marketing, customer relationship management, and one-to-one marketing: the classical relationship between the focal supplier and the focal customer was extensively studied but the beyond whole context was consigned to oblivion. To start recovering this gap, Gummesson (2004) decided to devote a book on networks in marketing, highlighting the importance of many-to-many interactions of the network (Gummesson, 2007). Black and Gallan (2015) revoke the concept of “network” referring to third actors to describe and explain the co-creation context. They shift the focus from the traditional service provider-customer relationship to the service network, which is defined as “a collaborative system of multiple entities working together to coproduce value” (Black & Gallan, 2015, p. 827). The authors found that these other actors have the power to influence system performance overall and can play a significant role in the co-creation process (Black & Gallan, 2015). Following the same direction, Fyrberg Yngfalk (2013) stated that during the co-creation process, actors interact among themselves and collaborate in each other’s activities, hence they have the power to exert influence on each other (Fyrberg Yngfalk, 2013). Indeed, the value network perspective establishes that all involved actors interact and combine resources to generate value both for themselves and others (Pinho et al., 2014).

### *2.5.2 Third parties’ roles and their influences on the customer and service provider*

As already explained in the previous chapters, the co-creation process goes beyond the dyad relationship, the traditional direction from the supplier to the customer, and the idea that service provider and customer have a static role. That is why it is interesting to focus on a network of actors when we are speaking about co-creation. A generic actor can be defined as a party that participates in value propositions and the co-creation process. More precisely, an actor can be an individual, a group of individuals, or a group of firms. In general, a generic actor can be the provider of the service and/or beneficiary of it. At the same time, a generic actor can be more or less committed and, in some situations, not even aware of its contribution to the co-creation process. That means it can be active or passive (Figure 1). Figure 2 illustrates the possible roles that generic actors may adopt in a service ecosystem, where solid lines represent dyadic exchanges and the dotted lines indicate potential other relationships (Ekman et al., 2016).

Figure 1: A typology of generic actor roles (Ekman et al., 2016)

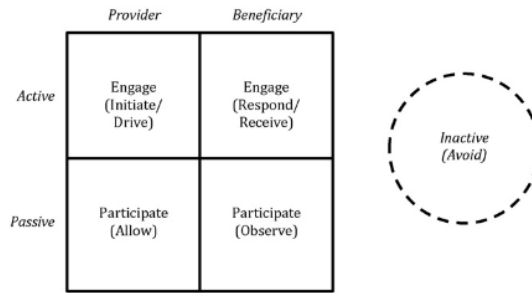
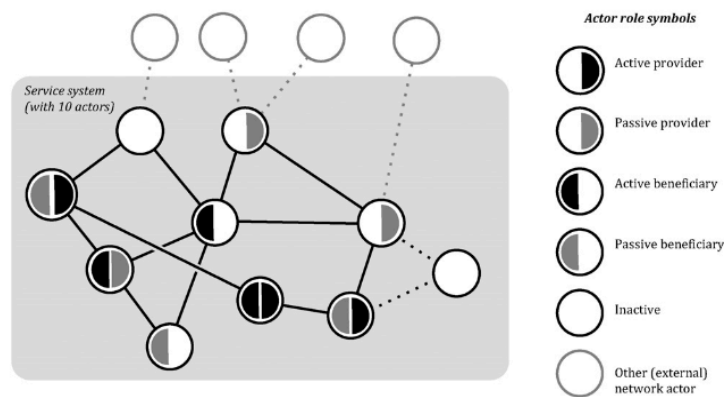


Figure 2: An actor-to-actor exchange service system and roles of the generic actors (Ekman et al., 2016)



So, Ekman and colleagues (2016) identified the generic roles that an actor can assume (Ekman et al., 2016). In addition, more specifically, Abboud and his colleagues (2021) identified five roles throughout the service literature that third parties can adopt. The first one is the bystander role. A third actor can be considered a bystander while being present during and/or observing resource exchange between the focal customer and the focal service supplier. In this situation, third parties can adopt the role of direct or indirect bystanders. Direct bystanders refer to third parties who are directly present or involved, whereas indirect bystanders are those who are not directly involved but may still be impacted by the situation. The second possible role is the connector one. This one fosters the exchange between the focal customer and the service provider. In this case, the third-party is the bridge between the customer and the service supplier, making the interaction between them possible through a physical person (direct interactions) or an online platform (indirect interactions). In the third place, there is the endorser role. The endorser role corresponds to a third-party who aims to share informational, emotional, and/or practical resources with the principal customer and/or the service supplier, intending to exchange resources. Hence, the focal customer, the focal service provider, and the third-party are all connected. Successively, the fourth role is the



balancer role. The balancer role implies the involvement of a third-party when the exchanged resources between the focal customer and the focal service supplier are not balanced. Furthermore, the third-party acts as a mediator or conciliator party. This situation happens when customers' and service providers' interests and needs do not correspond or one party or both parties ignore one another's requests. Finally, the last role identified is the partner role. Under these circumstances, the third parties are partners when they interact with the customer and the service supplier as well, and at the same time, both the customer and the service provider are involved in the exchange with one another. In that context, all actors are dependent upon one another (Abboud et al., 2021).

Overall, third-party roles are not static, however, they adapt to changes in the different situational frameworks. Several studies have investigated the influence that these third-party roles have on customers and/or service suppliers (Abboud et al., 2021). Bystanders can have an impact on the focal customer and service provider's experience. For instance, the perception of other customers in the same service escape influences a customer's service experience (Abboud et al., 2021 ; Ngo et al., 2016). In addition, bystanders can also affect the entire experience satisfaction of the customer and service provider (Abboud et al., 2021 ; Afthinos et al., 2017). At the same time, bystanders can be influenced by the focal customer and/or focal service provider. For example, according to research, a third-party being present during a customer experience and observing it can feel both joy and jealousy. These emotions can lead to a perception of unfairness and behaviors of complaining and repurchasing (Abboud et al., 2021 ; Ludwig et al., 2017). Empirical studies further demonstrate that connectors help the customer and the service provider to co-create value through online platforms (Abboud et al., 2021 ; Benoit et al., 2017). Additionally, the endorser role can have an impact on how the service delivery process is experienced, behaved, and/or assessed by the customers and/or service suppliers (Abboud et al., 2021 ; Borges et al., 2010). Analyzing the balancers, studies confirm that they can have a huge influence on the dyad relationship. An example is the study of Kim and colleagues (2010) suggesting that balancers can lead employees to be committed to the company as well as the customers to adopt the role of endorser (Abboud et al., 2021 ; Kim et al., 2010). In a situation of conflict, balancers can have the power to enhance the relationship between the customer and the service supplier by showing respect to one of them or both (Abboud et al., 2021 ; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2011). Finally, third parties in the role of partner influence the service experience and assessments of the other principal actors engaged (Abboud et al., 2021 ; Carson et al., 1997). They can also contribute to experience collective service experiences and assessments, such as community

feelings (Abboud et al., 2021 ; Finsterwalder & Kuppelwieser, 2011). In conclusion, third parties affect the traditional dyad relationship in different ways depending on the situation and the context.

### *2.5.3 Who are these third parties?*

In this sub-chapter, a literature review on the different possible third parties is collected and illustrated. It is curious to observe how the researchers have studied these third parties principally in the tourism context and how the focus is on just one third-party in particular.

#### *Tourist-to-tourist interactions on-site*

Since the interest in the analysis of other actors has been raised, one of the most popular studied relationships is the customer-to-customer (C2C) relationship (Nicholls, 2010). Several services allow or require the presence and/or participation of many customers at the same time. Therefore, other customers can influence the experience of other customers (Nicholls & Mohsen, 2019). A wide range of empirical studies has focused attention on that relationship. Miao and Mattila (2013) researched how temporal distance and physical proximity from other customers during the service experience have an impact on the focal customer's emotional responses to the behavior of others as well as how these reactions affect the overall service satisfaction. Considering the framework of Verhoef and colleagues (2009), suggesting that the customer experience is characterized by the customer's physical, cognitive, affective, and social responses, the authors demonstrated that various dimensions may intertwine to influence customer experiences (Miao & Mattila, 2013). In tourism, C2C interactions can be crucial for the experience co-creation because they can provide social value and benefits to the tourist. This specific context offers multiple occasions, such as cruise ship travel, group tours, holiday resort stays, and festival and event visitations, where tourists can meet, spend time together, and share collective moments (Rihova et al., 2018).

The empirical study of Reichenberger (2017a) highlights that social interactions between the focal tourist and other visitors happen for two possible reasons: intrinsic and extrinsic goals. The first possibility is explained by the joy and pleasure that the tourists benefit from the interaction, rather than the second option refers to politeness reasons or need for information or help. Another interesting result from that research is that these interactions generate value in terms of enjoyment, fun, and information. This is facilitated by sharing advice, inputs, and perspectives, enhancing positively the tourist experience. In addition, personal and long social interactions lead to the co-creation of emotional value, which has positive effects on the

tourist experience (Reichenberger, 2017a). Following the inputs of others, the tourist tries and lives new adventures. He can also develop more deep interactions with the purpose to know others better (Huang, 2008). Not just in the case of a single backpacker traveler, other tourists can fulfill the need for connecting with others, offering social support to the traveler. Individuals are used to receiving social support from their families, friends, and peers daily, therefore when they are experiencing a touristic activity which is an unfamiliar environment, tourists look for social contact with other tourists to fill a social void (Reichenberger, 2017b ; Lin et al., 2019). Indeed, the quality of C2C interactions can be a further factor that can have a direct positive influence on the touristic experience and indirect impacts on the overall experience satisfaction (Huang & Hsu, 2010).

Going more into detail, according to Pearce (2005), interactions among tourists can be categorized into intragroup and intergroup interactions. The first one includes travel companions such as friends and families who decide to organize a trip and travel together, and the second one refers to stranger visitors accidentally met during the trip. This distinction can be relevant when travelers do not develop at all or develop superficial interactions with other visitors. It implies that individuals have a strong tie within their own group and feel a reduced need to socialize with other tourists (Huang & Hsu, 2009). Nevertheless, some studies examined the impact of self-disclosure (the openness of the tourist to reveal personal information, viewpoints, advice, opinions, etc.) on tourist-to-tourist interactions. The findings shed light that intragroup interactions tend to lead to a weaker effect of self-disclosure, however, intergroup interactions stimulate the tourist to open himself and establish cohesion and intimacy (e.g., Lin et al., 2019).

In conclusion, C2C interactions are important for the experience co-creation process. Their importance is particularly emphasized by the Customer-Dominant logic, conceptualized by Heinonen, Strandvik, and Voima (2013). The Customer-Dominant logic prioritizes the significance of value created within experiences and practices, which are influenced by the customer's social environment (Heinonen et al., 2013 ; Rihova et al., 2018).

### *Families and friends*

Going beyond the boundaries of the relationship between the customer and the service provider in the co-creation process, families and friends assume a distinctive significance, not just in the tourism context, but also in other domains, such as the healthcare environment. In the healthcare domain, families and friends can offer support to the patient and can be

involved in the care service to enhance the patient's experience. The involvement of families and friends facilitates the work of care providers as well (Black & Gallan, 2015). In addition to better-quality service and more efficient care, their inclusion leads to a higher engagement of patients to collaborate as they can be more influential (Carmel et al., 2013). In the same way, families and friends can influence an individual's decision to travel to a specific destination. According to Beiger and Laesser (2004), the most frequent and recurrent information source for the majority of voyagers, before deciding on a particular travel destination, is word of mouth (WOM) from family members and friends (Murphy et al., 2007). Tourists address relatives and friends to collect information to decrease the risk of uncertainty and the unknown (Fodness & Murray, 1997). Families and friends' inputs are particularly precious when the individual would like to organize a long trip, which requires the investment of a large amount of money (Chang, 2007), or when the person wishes to visit a new place never visited before (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015). Besides, they help the traveler to reduce the planning time and the information search avoiding the consultation of various information sources (Fodness & Murray, 1997). Further, traditional information sources such as relatives and colleagues may be considered more reliable (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015).

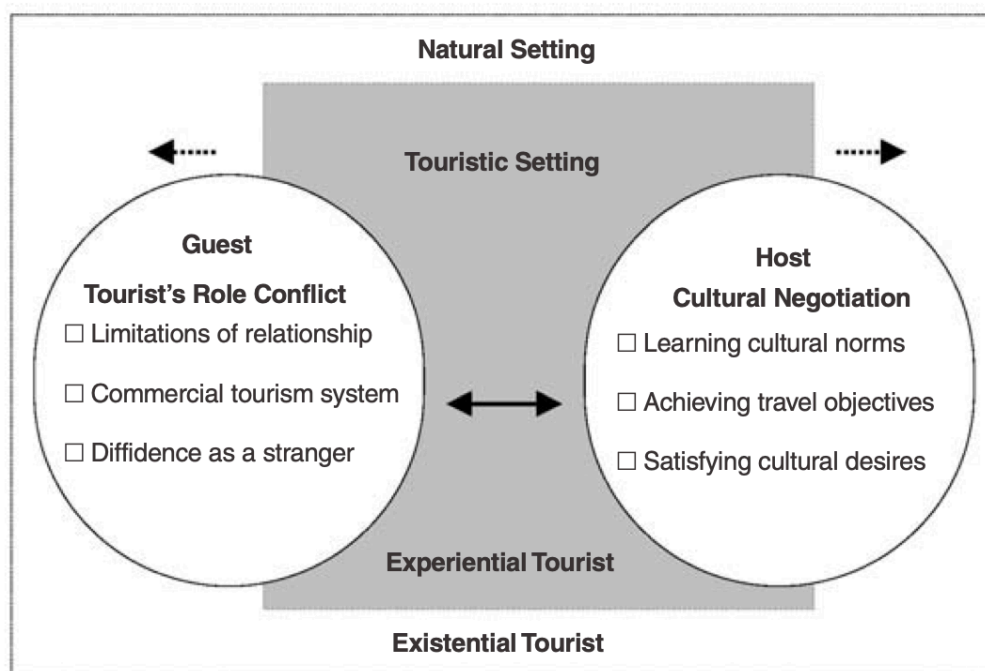
Although few studies have been dedicated to the analysis of this third-party category in the tourism context (Murphy et al., 2007), the interest in taking into consideration families and friends in the co-creation of experiences has increased (Carù & Cova, 2015).

#### *Local communities/residents*

Interactions between tourists and local communities are always more common because visitors tend to engage more gladly with other cultures and societies. The quality of these social and cultural interactions between the visitor and the residents can affect the tourist experience as well as the perception of locals about the level of acceptance and tolerance of travelers (Armenski et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the literature debate has been strongly dedicated to understanding tourism's influence on local people. A narrow selection of tourism studies has examined the impact of tourist-host community interactions on tourists (Ming & Wall, 2010). One of the captivating studies in that context is the research of Pizam and colleagues (2000). It aimed to observe the differences among long-term tourists concerning their feelings towards residents, their attitudes towards local communities and the destination, and their overall satisfaction with the tourist experience. As a result, this study showed that the higher the strengths of social interactions between visitors and local people, the more the

tourists exhibit positive sentiments towards the local community and experience a positive shift in attitudes towards local people as well as the destination. In addition, the findings reported that the higher the strengths of social interactions between tourists and residents, the more favorable the satisfaction of these visitors with their overall tourist experience. On the other hand, tourists who develop superficial relationships with local people have less favorable feelings towards them and have less favorable change in attitudes towards them and the destination (Pizam et al., 2000). Yoo and Sohn (2003) demonstrated that social relationships between tourists and the guest population can influence the tourist's willingness to stay longer in a place and their satisfaction with the overall experience. Indeed, based on the founded results, they tried to build a model of intercultural interactions of a tourist (Figure 3). It resumes the increasing desire of tourists to approach local people. The environmental dimension of intercultural interactions of the tourists branches out of "tourist setting" and "natural setting". The first one refers to the custom-made environment for visitors, which they are encouraged to transcend. In contrast, the latter represents the natural space that tourists aspire to experience and explore. Tourists aim to pass through the artificial tourist environment to experience the natural environment, developing social bonds with the residents. They increasingly express the desire to change their status from experiential tourists to existential tourists (Yoo & Sohn, 2003).

*Figure 3: Structural Model of Intercultural Interactions of International Tourist (Yoo & Sohn, 2003)*



Additionally, local people possess the knowledge and the tricks that can add value to tourists' experience and allow them to approach the natural environment, also acknowledging the local problems (Yuksel et al., 1999). Morgan and Xu (2009) demonstrated that the first primary reason for which tourists have unique and magical experiences is the social contact with the residents at the holiday destination (Morgan & Xu, 2009). Indeed, people seek connection with local people because enhances their tourist experience (Eusébio & Carneiro, 2012).

To sum up, interactions between tourists and residents have become the heart of tourism literature (Li et al., 2018), and the increasing desire of visitors to acquire existential tourist status makes the tourists-host relationships more important for the co-creation of experience (Yoo & Sohn, 2003).

#### *Online Platforms, Online Communities, Social media influencers*

Before the revolution of Web 3.0, the Web 2.0 era with the increasing importance of the Internet and the development of new technologies has also impacted tourism, giving birth to several mobile tourist guides, virtual travel agents, blogs, videos, images, podcasts, and tourist web forums. These sources provide advice and information to tourists in order to enhance their experience in the chosen holiday destination (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009 ; Schmallager & Carson, 2007). More specifically, travel blogs are travel platforms where individuals have the opportunity to write their experiences and personal comments, attach links, or post news and pictures. Everyone is free to consult them. The advantage is that the collection of information is easy and quick, and the content reflects factual experiences. Moreover, the content is tailored to people who are particularly interested in the topic and wish to know how the authors of the story experienced the specific place (Volo, 2010). In addition, the empirical research of Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) showed that generally videos significantly influence the motivation of potential travelers to spend their vacation in a specific place, stimulating them to dream about that destination and imagine it. Another interesting finding is that for instance, the YouTube platform allows the creation of a travel online community where people interact, exchange curious information, give necessary tips, provide recommendations, and share their personal experiences. Certainly, this can be helpful for potential visitors who are thinking of visiting a particular place (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Beyond the YouTube community, tourists search for information and interact with others on other virtual platforms as well, such as Trip Advisor, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram (understood as a community), booking.com, and Airbnb (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). All these online traveler communities are assessed by individuals as trustable

and credible because they can find personal experience's testimonies, influencing the decision-making process of the focal tourist (Roeffen & Scholl-Grissemann, 2016). So, studies of online communities suggest that people use virtual communities for two main reasons: collecting information and actively participating in the creation and share content for other subscribers. Thus, virtual communities take part in the co-creation process as third parties since they create value (informational value, entertainment value, social integrative value, personal integrative value, and community interactivity) for the focal customer (tourist). The relationship with the focal tourist goes beyond the classical encounter (Rubio et al., 2018). In parallel, even though few studies do not consider information search behavior as part of the co-creation process (Tsai & Pai, 2013), scholars and experts mainly support the idea that the passive participation of tourists in online travel communities, which means content consumption without production and not many connections with others, is a lurking co-creation behavior (Hu & Luo, 2016).

Online communities influence the focal tourist at all phases of the tourist experience (getting inspiration and motivation, collecting information, finding recommendations for on-site activities, and sharing the trip) (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015).

Going further, besides online communities, social media influencers do not go unnoticed. In the last decade, online influencer marketing has become an important instrument that companies use to promote their offerings (services and products) through well-known influencers, such as Chiara Ferragni (Italian fashion influencer) (Leung et al., 2022). Especially in the tourism environment social media influencers play an essential role in the tourist information process (Pop et al., 2022). The recent leading social media is Instagram, where influencers share photo and video content (Evans et al., 2017), and tourists look for information about holiday places and tourism products (Guerreiro et al., 2019).

A travel influencer refers to a person who is engaged in the promotion of products or services only or primarily in the tourism as well as travel industry through online word-of-mouth spread on their online platforms. In this way, they have the power to influence the consumers on their future probable holiday experience (George et al., 2021). Travel influencers have completely revolutionized how to approach, interact, and engage with travelers. They reveal crucial information about holiday destinations, sleep places, activities, tourist attractions, restaurants etcetera therefore tourists can have access to that content before they leave for a vacation destination (Manthiou et al., 2024). Indeed, the study of Bašan and colleagues (2023)

demonstrated that travel influencers can influence the destination value co-creation process impacting the focal tourist before, during, and after the tourist's experience (Bašan et al., 2023). Further, Guerreiro and his research groupmates (2019) confirmed that people rely on social networks to organize their journey. This result is in line with the previous studies conducted by other authors. Moreover, travelers use social media (mainly Instagram) to get inspiration as well as information about vacation places (Guerreiro et al., 2019). However, in the tourism literature, there is a discrepancy about the social media influencers' influence on destination decisions. As revealed by Alic et al. (2017) digital influencers definitely influence the individual's evaluation of the different destination alternatives (Alic et al., 2017), whereas according to Guerreiro and colleagues, the experience of social media influencers does not represent the most important factor to influence the tourist's assessment process. Individuals who follow digital influencers' advice and decide to visit the promoted place believe that travel influencers are credible, not fake, and reliable (Guerreiro et al., 2019). In addition, travel influencers can also assume a key role in the final stage of a tourist experience: the post-experience – posting and sharing of the experience. It is demonstrated that individuals (tourists) who consult and use social media for personal reasons and achievements tend to post their experiences on social media (Kang & Schuett, 2013).

To resume, nowadays, online platforms, virtual communities, and travel influencers result in being important third parties in the experience co-creation and can hugely influence the focal tourist.

#### *Hotel staff, front-line service employees*

Seeing as the literature on front-line service employees as third parties in the experience co-creation is almost nonexistent, in this paragraph the different roles of the service employees are displayed and explained.

First of all, the interactions between the focal tourist and the front-line service employees are mainly categorized as dyadic encounters (e.g., Buonincontri et al., 2017 ; Ramaswamy, 2011 ; Carù & Cova, 2015). They represent a fundamental factor in achieving a high level of customer satisfaction and making customers loyal (Dedeoğlu et al., 2018). One of the classical roles of front-line service employees is limited to the delivery of service to the customers (Hartline & Ferrell, 2024). To enhance the customer experience, front-line employees are also in charge of making the offered services more tangible for the customers (Bowen, 2016). In reality, it is universally agreed that service employees need to cooperate



with the customers to generate value in order to satisfy their requests and meet their expectations (Chan et al., 2010). From a co-creation perspective, they are viewed as operant resources for the customers (tourists), sharing knowledge, as well as offering physical and mental skills (Bowen, 2016). However, in the tourism context, service employees can operate as a third-party in the experience co-creation process. Besides their traditional tasks as receiving guests, helping them with check-in, check-out, and payments, they are also the principal contact information point for the visitors during their stay at the holiday destination (Hai-yan & Baum, 2006). Indeed, tourists can decide to ask the hotel staff, for instance, for more information about a place as travelers can feel unfamiliar with the surrounding environment and can have a lack of knowledge about the specific area: useful advice, places to visit, things to do, the culture, the life of the residents, the tendency of the economy, and clear and concise safety directions (Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

Although service employees can assume the role of third parties, the literature on the topic is extremely limited. The main focus is on the analysis of the relationship between service employees and the customer as a dyadic encounter (Hartline & Ferrell, 2024).

## **2.6 The place attachment and revisit intention**

During the tourist experience, tourists form emotional connections with several objects and entities such as locations, brands, or activities. In other words, in the tourism context, the notion of “place attachment” comes from the idea that tourists develop emotional feelings toward a specific vacation destination due to the interactions between the physical escape and other individuals (Prayag & Lee, 2019). In the last decades, the tourism literature has consecrated a wide range of studies on place/destination attachment, increasing curiosity about the topic among researchers (Dwyer et al., 2019). Another popular subject for the tourism research field is the revisit intention. It refers to the tourist’s willingness to come back to a place both in the short and long-term (Ramukumba, 2018).

Stylos and colleagues (2017) have dedicated their time to studying the effect of place attachment on the intention to revisit. The study predicts that place attachment influences the revisit intention of visitors (Stylos et al., 2017). Isa, Aryanto, and Kiumarsi (2020) suggest that place attachment has a positive impact on the revisit intention of tourists. Specifically, they found out that the social bonding dimension of place attachment, encompassing the social interactions of the focal tourist with other visitors, with the local community, and with friends and relatives, is the most influent factor for the revisit intention (Isa et al., 2020).

Interesting to know is that visitors tend to develop an emotional bond with the holiday destination when they have a unique and unforgettable tourist experience (Vada et al., 2019), which is usually enhanced when tourists interact with multiple actors (e.g., Pizam et al., 2000 ; Reichenberger, 2017a ; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009).

Furthermore, in the picture of this master thesis, considering the dimension of experience co-creation and the influence that the different third parties can have on the focal tourist (see previous chapters), it is interesting to observe if the tourist's interactions with other actors can generate a sense of belonging to the determined destination and encourage the willingness to revisit that place.

## **2.7 Critics of the literature on the co-creation process**

By reviewing the existing literature on the topic, it seems like the debate has been focused on the value co-creation between the service provider and the customer, highlighting the fact that the customer actively participates in the co-creation process (Fan & Luo, 2020 ; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This co-creation with the customers is also stressed in the tourism sector, where the tourists collaborate with their service providers to create their tourist experience and retire value from this latter one (Buonincontri et al., 2017). However, recently, an awakening in the literature debate has arisen. Not just the customer is involved in the co-creation, other actors appear and influence the focal customer (tourist) (Abboud et al., 2021). The majority of the studies dedicated to co-creation with the involvement of multiple stakeholders consider co-creation as a positive process, which leads to the generation of value for all parts (Fodness & Murray, 1997 ; Guerreiro et al., 2019 ; Manthiou et al., 2024 ; Prayag & Ryan, 2012 ; Reichenberger, 2017a ; Rihova et al., 2018 ; Yoo & Sohn, 2003). Although the co-creation of experiences with different third parties is generally viewed as positive, researchers should not forget that co-creation has also its dark side. Indeed, some authors, such as Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010), call attention to the possibility that co-destruction can be the result of actors' interactions (Fyrberg Yngfalk, 2013). Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010) highlight the co-destruction process in a dyadic encounter, insisting on the fact that both companies and customers can destroy the co-created value (Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010), defining the value co-destruction as followed: "an interactional process between service systems that results in a decline in at least one of the system's well-being" (Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010, p. 431). Moreover, other scholars have studied this phenomenon taking into consideration the wide network of actors that can participate in the co-creation process. For instance, it is demonstrated that the co-destruction of experiences can occur when each

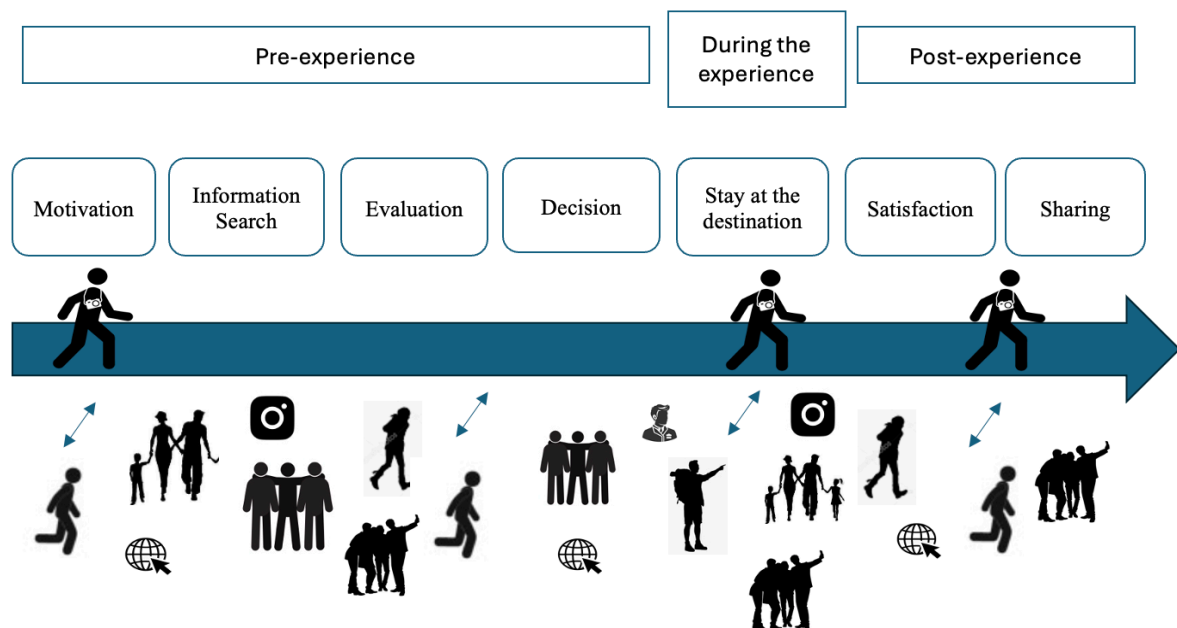
involved actor does not have the same interests or does not aim to achieve the same goals (Prior & Marco-Cueva, 2016), or when the customer adopts a negative attitude (Echeverri et al., 2012). Going further, the tourism sector is particularly subjected to the presence of co-destruction behaviors, especially in the online environment: fake news, false recommendations, misleading information, fake profiles on social media, etc. (Frau et al., 2018). Another source of co-destruction of experiences comes from tourist-to-tourist interactions: the negative influence of the presence of other stranger visitors on the focal tourist's experience can be classified as co-destruction of tourism value (Han et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is important to recognize and be aware that the interactions between the focal tourist and other actors can also lead to the co-destruction of the experience.

### III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### 3.1 Conceptual model

The conceptual model illustrates the framework of this master's thesis, which is explained in the next sections. The seven steps of the tourist's journey are described and the interactions at each stage between the focal tourist and the different third parties are discussed.

Figure 4: Conceptual framework (adapted from Campos et al., 2018 ; Hamilton et al., 2021)



### 3.2 Motivation

In the tourism literature, motivation is meant as an instrument that allows tourists to satisfy psychological desires and needs. It is recognized that internal and external influences can shape individuals' motivation (Kim et al., 2021). Usually, internal motives refer to the concept of a "push motivation", instead, external motives are linked to the notion of "pull motivation". In other words, push motivation relates to internal stimuli. For instance, the need to learn new things, discover new cultures, visit new places, and the desire for social interactions. However, pull motivation comes from the appeal of the holiday destination, referring to the natural landscapes, the place's history and traditions, or its gastronomy (Antón et al., 2017). In addition, within the pull motivation category, it is possible to include "other third parties". An important external influence is "other third parties" besides the service provider, which can motivate the tourist to leave home to visit a new place. Tourists are often

driven by interactions with proximal and distal others (Hamilton et al., 2021). Indeed, tourists can feel the need to visit a specific place because they are positively influenced by external stimuli, such as friends, relatives, social influencers, or other attractive messages (Heitmann, 2011). This motivational state is specifically called *evocation* (a sub-category of inspiration), which clearly explains that an individual is typically stimulated to do something by external influences rather than conscious self-activation (Dai et al., 2022).

Consequently, motivation is a crucial phase to consider in a tourist journey, where more factors can impact the tourist's motivation to travel to a determined destination.

### **3.3 Information search**

The information search stage helps the tourists evaluate the different alternatives and make a final decision. The process of seeking information can be divided into two parts: the internal and the external categories. The first one occurs when individuals' knowledge comes from their past experiences, whereas the latter one is oriented to the active search of several information in the marketplace (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). The most common information sources for tourists are the following: first, personal sources, such as relatives, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, or working colleagues. Second, commercial sources like service employees, marketing messages, and pop-up advertising. Third, public sources, with a wide range from other tourists' reviews to social media posts (Heitmann, 2011). Especially, if a traveler wishes to organize a complex trip, he turns on multiple external information sources: experienced friends or family members, tourist agencies, guidebooks, or travel magazines (Fodness & Murray, 1999). Clearly, with the increasing imposition of technology in people's lives, classical word-of-mouth is not today the only way to collect information. Individuals still ask for advice from their friends or their families, however, they intensively look at online reviews on online platforms, past experiences of other visitors on online communities, or the adventures of famous social traveler influencers (Hamilton et al., 2021).

In brief, it is interesting to include this phase in the tourist journey because several third parties can interact with the focal traveler and influence the final decision to choose the specific destination

### **3.4 Evaluation**

Evaluation is a key step in the tourist journey because it consists of evaluating the different information sources. In this situation, tourists assess and classify according to credibility and trustworthiness the various given tips (Hamilton et al., 2021). Commonly, individuals evaluate a source in terms of trust and usefulness (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). Usually, their credibility perceptions of a source of information and the usefulness of the information strongly influence the tourist's intention to follow the proposed inputs. This can also lead them to reconsider that source for further research (Park et al., 2014). Additionally, it is demonstrated that information sources with a high level of credibility result in being more persuasive than others with a low credibility consideration, even though the tourist does not agree with the content of that information search (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). In the tourism academic world, several studies showed the importance of credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity of the information sources for the tourist's decision-making process (Del Chiappa, 2011 ; Sabari Shankar, 2021). Further, other key factors that travelers consider during the evaluation process are the easy accessibility of information, personalization (the degree to which the information source provides customized content), security, and enabling interaction (No & Kim , 2015).

Therefore, the evaluation step must be part of a tourist's journey.

### **3.5 Decision**

A decision is the result of the previous phases (motivation, information search, and evaluation), which include the whole tourist's interactions with different actors before the experience (Hamilton et al., 2021). More in detail, during this stage, tourists are influenced by what others say in the pre-decision stages. In particular, word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) from family members, friends, acquaintances, and online travel communities significantly impact the individual's decision (Chang et al., 2017). However, it is necessary to be aware that another external factor can have an important weight in a tourist's decision-making: the budget. Individuals do not just base their decisions on what others recommend, but they also consider their available budget (Correia & Crouch, 2004). Hence, the decision phase is also primordial in the tourist's journey.

### **3.6 Stay at the destination**

In their construct of the social customer journey, Hamilton and colleagues (2021) do not mention the phase during the tourist experience. However, Campos et al. (2018) emphasized

the on-site experience. They highlight the possibility for tourists to participate in unplanned and unexpected on-site activities and share moments with other people (Campos et al., 2018). The stay at the holiday destination involves the tourist physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually (Campos et al., 2018). While staying in a place, the visitors are engaged in various direct interactions with other unknown tourists (Nicholls & Mohsen, 2019), local people (Pizam et al., 2000), hospitality service employees (Hai-yan & Baum, 2006), and can virtually active or passive connect with travel online communities (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015), or social influencers (Guerreiro et al., 2019). Especially, the use of smartphones allows visitors to consult online platforms and social media and interact in online communities at any time during their experience to collect information about the place and on-site activities (Liu et al., 2022 ; Mieli, 2024). Furthermore, on-site experience is the most important phase in the tourist's journey. In situ interactions strongly influence the tourist's experience and are fundamental for the experience co-creation (Campos et al., 2016 ; Campos et al., 2018).

### **3.7 Satisfaction**

In the last decades, consumer satisfaction has drawn the attention of academics and marketers. A wide range of empirical studies have been dedicated to the investigation of consumer satisfaction toward products as well as services (Ince & Bowen, 2011). According to Giese and Cote (2000), consumer satisfaction is “a summary affective response of varying intensity with a time-specific point of determination and limited duration directed toward focal aspects of product acquisition and/or consumption” (Giese & Cote, 2000, p. 15). More precisely, in the tourism environment, tourist satisfaction mainly refers to the degree of happiness and satisfaction that they have retired from the overall tourist experience, which also influences the tourist's willingness to repeat the experience or advise it to someone else (Hui et al., 2007). In other words, tourist satisfaction is determined by the extent to which trip expectations and programmed and unexpected on-site activities are fulfilled and met (Zeng & Li, 2021).

Satisfaction can be enhanced or reduced when individuals live the experience or spend moments during their holiday in the presence of other people. This can lead to the generation of positive or negative feelings and emotions, which can extremely impact the overall satisfaction of the tourist experience (Hamilton et al., 2021). Further, it is interesting to elucidate that tourist satisfaction can be also influenced by the choice of others. Traveler tends to compare his choices with those of others. He believes that if others have chosen the same activities or the same alternatives, it means that his choices are good. Hence, he has found

social support from others. On the opposite side, if others have made different choices, the tourist tends to ask himself the reasons why others have chosen differently, and this contrast between him and others can lead to reevaluating his choices, bringing him to follow others' inputs, with the intent to increasing the level of his satisfaction (Poynor et al., 2012). However, tourist satisfaction is not just influenced by other physical people. Also, distal others, such as social media influencers or virtual community members can provide useful input, tips, and information that can lead to enhanced satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Hamilton et al., 2021).

Furthermore, satisfaction is an important step in the tourist's journey because it can influence the tourist's willingness to revisit the place and start e-WOM or classical WOM with others, providing advice and tips (Zeng & Li, 2021). Secondly, as specified in the previous paragraph, the others can exert an influence on the focal tourist, impacting the degree of satisfaction.

### **3.8 Sharing**

The last phase is sharing experiences. This latter one is also related to the satisfaction phase (Zeng & Li, 2021). The traditional way to share an experience is word-of-mouth (WOM) from person to person. It assumes a significant role when individuals need to choose a new destination, where spending their holidays. In this situation, usually, people heavily trust the classical WOM coming from friends, relatives, or colleagues (Confente, 2015). However, nowadays with the strong presence of technology in daily life, tourists are constantly exposed to the experiences of others in a virtual world, hence they are also encouraged to follow the new trend and share their trip experience (Su et al., 2021). The majority of online platforms and social media enable tourists to post stories, images, audio, videos, and informational content. Consequently, sharing all this content can help others build their tourist experience (Kang & Schuett, 2013). Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) reaches a large audience, allows immediate content transmission, and can give rise to virtual interactions within travelers' communities, significantly influencing or helping others (Litvin et al., 2008).

In conclusion, sharing is a social process. It allows tourists to receive support as well as give support to others.



### 3.9 Research question and research objectives

Once defined the different steps of the tourist's journey and discussed the third parties' influence on the focal tourist during these phases, it is possible to state the main research objective (RO) of this master thesis:

*ROI.* The first RO is to explore the influence of third-party actors on the co-creation of customer tourism service experience.

The first RO represents an enormous gap in the literature. First, researchers have been dedicated to the study of dyadic relationships without taking into consideration the influence of others during the whole processing of experience creation (Abboud et al., 2021). Secondly, the existing studies are fragmented, focusing on a specific phase of the customer's journey (pre-experience, on-site experience, post-experience) (e.g., Nicholls, 2010), also without dividing these three main phases into sub-phases (e.g., Campos et al., 2018).

The research of Hamilton et al. (2021) stands out as the key study for this topic; however, the authors build the social customer journey based on the decision-making process, hence they do not consider the phase of the on-site experience, overlooking all the potential interactions during this latter one. In addition, based on this study, Hamilton and colleagues have ignored who are these "social others", providing a general overview of the subject. Then, they neglect the nature of the social influence, which can vary through the customer's journey. Finally, they do not take into consideration how all the social others' influence at one stage can affect together the focal customer (Hamilton et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the first RO is followed by three sub-questions:

*Q1.* Who are the third-party actors?

*Q2.* When do they influence the focal customer?

*Q3.* How do they influence the customer?

## IV. METHODOLOGY

The study aims at obtaining empirical evidence for the main RO and the following three subquestions, clarified in Chapter 3.9. Therefore, a qualitative approach is chosen for several reasons.

First of all, qualitative research embraces the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants representing them in the most truthful manner possible. Typical of this research methodology is that the interviewer interacts directly with the interviewee, and the participant explains and tells stories/experiences in his/her own words (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012).

For this master's thesis, the third-party actors' influence on the experience co-creation process is studied through the adapted concept of the social customer journey, during which the customers enter into touch with multiple stakeholders (adapted from Campos et al., 2018 ; Hamilton et al., 2021). Thus, to understand who these other actors are, when, and how they influence the focal tourist (throughout the tourist's journey), it is fundamental to investigate in depth the tourist experience. It also necessitates comprehensive insights into the particular components that shape the unique interactions known as "moments of truth" (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). Therefore, semi-structured interviews are chosen.

### 4.1 Data collection

The research of Huang and Hsu (2009) focuses on the study of social interaction between tourists doing a cruise holiday and the effect of these social relationships between them on the overall tourist trip according to the cruise passengers' perspective (Huang & Hsu, 2009). As Huang and Hsu (2009) proceeded, an interview guide was created to investigate the tourist experience in the context of this master's thesis. The interview questionnaire started with two open questions. Participants were asked firstly to choose one of their tourist experiences, dated within the last 2-3 years involving three or more nights away from home, and a second time to describe their experience from the moment of the conception/the idea until their return from the trip. This approach leaves participants to speak freely without constraints (unstructured approach). Only recent stories were taken into consideration to ensure the results's topicality. Then, the first two questions were followed by a series of several specific questions about each phase of the tourist's journey (Campos et al., 2018, Hamilton et al., 2021), restoring a structured framework. For each phase, the key arguments were the social

interactions between the focal tourist and the other third parties. Indeed, participants were asked to tell how they related with all these third parties, explain how the interactions were, and which influence these interactions had on their tourist experience. In this way, a comparison between the stages could be made, highlighting the differences and similarities.

The tourist's satisfaction with social interactions before, during, and after the experience was measured in two ways. Firstly, respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the interactions they had with others / the given tips. Later, they were asked to indicate their satisfaction on a 5-Likert scale (1= very dissatisfied; 5= very satisfied). Similarly, the influence of the physical and online environment on the tourist's decision to choose the destination, the willingness to spread WOM/e-WOM, and the revisit intention were measured on a 5-Likert scale. For the first case, the used scale was from no influence (1) to strongly influenced (5). Whereas for the other two variables (WOM, revisit intention) the following scale was considered: completely disagree (1) to completely agree (5). The Likert scale provided a way for participants to precisely position themselves on a specific subject, thus representing at best their quantitative degree of satisfaction (Johns, 2010). The table below resumes the different measured variables with a 5-Likert scale and indicates in which phase of the tourist's journey they were taken into consideration (Table 1).

*Table 1: Overview of the selected measured variables with a 5-Likert scale*

<b>Pre-experience</b>	<b>During the experience</b>	<b>Post-experience</b>
Tourist's satisfaction with the given inputs coming from third parties. <b>1= very dissatisfied; 5= very satisfied</b>	Tourist's satisfaction with the social interactions <b>1= very dissatisfied; 5= very satisfied</b>	Tourist's satisfaction with the overall experience <b>1= very dissatisfied; 5= very satisfied</b>
The influence of the physical and online environment on the tourist's decision <b>1= no influence; 5= strongly influenced</b>		Tourist's willingness to spread WOM/e-WOM <b>1= completely disagree; 5= completely agree</b>
		Tourist's revisit intention <b>1= completely agree; 5= completely agree</b>

The final part of the interview was dedicated to tourists' social and demographic information. The age, gender, level of education, the actual job, the number of travelers, the duration and date of the trip, and the trip occasion were asked.

Further, as Huang and Hsu (2009) made it, the interview guide was initially pilot-tested. Three interview tests were executed with three friends, and they gave feedback about the clarity, the difficulty, and the length of the questions to enhance the quality of the questionnaire.

## **4.2 Sample**

Instead, inspired by the empirical study of Mathis and colleagues (2016), this master's thesis considered a sample of tourists who are 18 years of age or older, have experienced a leisure journey (three or more nights away from home), and have engaged at least in an activity that was recommended to them (Mathis et al., 2016). Following this logic, purposive sampling was used. It means that the researcher selected the interviewees for this study. Even though the chosen sample is not viewed as representative of the population, the main advantage of this method is to draw attention to particular characteristics of the interviewees, which can strongly contribute to finding the answer to the research question(s) (Rai & Thapa, 2015).

Finally, in order to obtain a consistent, valid, and reliable study, a total sample size of 20 interviews was attained (Hennik & Kaiser, 2022), conducted through the Microsoft application Teams. This number facilitates the reaching of the saturation point. It represents the point, where the researcher possesses the necessary information and data to repeat the study, and where the gathering of new outcomes starts to be difficult because the respondents' answers nearly correspond and are repeated (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

## **4.3 Analysis**

Regarding the analysis, the first step was to transcribe the interviews (n=20). This process easily enabled the conversion of digitally collected data into transcripts. The original spoken respondents' narratives in English, German, French, and Italian were transcribed and then translated into English, facilitating the analysis and interpretation of interview data (Widodo, 2014). After transcribing the interviews, the next step was to code the data. Based on the empirical study conducted by Stein and Ramaseshan (2016), part of their data analysis process was analogously applied to this master's thesis. An inductive approach was used. This means that the analysis starts without preconceived notions or predefined categories related to tourist experience touchpoints. The data were analyzed from the participants' responses

directly, allowing themes and information to emerge organically from the data itself (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). After carefully reading the participants' responses, the interview was divided into seven parts corresponding to the tourist's journey phases (motivation, information search, evaluation, decision, satisfaction, and sharing). Then, units of information were created. The involved third parties were categorized, describing the relationship type that they had with the focal tourist (the interviewee).

## V. FINDINGS

### 5.1 Sample description

Inspired by the study of Huang and Hsu (2009), the sample will be described as follows. Table 2 shows the demographic profile of the 20 respondents and the background of their tourist experience. For each interviewee, a number code from C01 to C20 was attributed to guarantee anonymity.

*Table 2: Demographic profile and background of the tourist experience of the 20 participants*

Demographics	No. of people	Interview number	Tourist Experience Background	No. of people	Interview number
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Length of tourist experience</b>		
Male	<b>12</b>	C01; C02; C03; C05; C06; C08; C10; C11; C14; C16; C18; C19	3-6 nights	<b>7</b>	C02; C03; C04; C05; C07; C13; C18
Female	<b>8</b>	C04; C07; C09; C12; C13; C15; C17; C20	7-13 nights	<b>6</b>	C01; C06; C11; C15; C19; C20
			14 or more nights	<b>6</b>	C08; C09; C10; C12; C14; C17
<b>Age</b>			<b>Travel companion</b>		
24-29 years	<b>15</b>	C01; C02; C03; C04; C07; C09; C10; C11; C12; C13; C14; C16; C17; C19; C20	Spouse/Partner	<b>3</b>	C04; C11; C20
30-35 years	<b>2</b>	C05; C06	Friends	<b>4</b>	C05; C06; C07; C12
Above 35 years	<b>3</b>	C08; C15; C18	Family members	<b>5</b>	C03; C08; C12; C13; C16
			No one else	<b>9</b>	C01; C02; C09; C10; C14; C15; C17; C18; C19
<b>Education Level</b>			<b>Time of tourist experience (Y)</b>		
Secondary school/ Apprenticeship	<b>2</b>	C11; C13	2021	<b>6</b>	C01; C03; C05; C09; C10; C18

Higher education institutions	5	C13; C14; C15; C17; C20	2022	4	C08; C11; C15; C19
Bachelor	6	C01; C06; C08; C09; C18; C19	2023	7	C02; C06; C13; C14; C16; C17; C20
Master/PhD	8	C02; C03; C04; C05; C07; C10; C12; C16;	2024	2	C07; C12
<b>Actual Job</b>			<b>Trip occasion</b>		
Full time student	3	C07; C13; C17	Vacation/Holidays	10	C01; C02; C03; C04; C05; C06; C08; C11; C16; C20
Student Jobs	2	C05; C12	Work journey	1	C18
Transportation Service	3	C06; C08; C15	Study journey	2	C09; C10
Hospitality Service	2	C04; C18	Language journey	1	C17
ICT Service	1	C16	Other occasions (birthday, diploma ceremony, changeset, break before beginning a new job, study break)	6	C07; C12; C13; C14; C15; C19
Building Sector	4	C01; C09; C10; C11			
Graphics Service	1	C20			
Finance Service	1	C02			
Management	2	C03; C19			
Engineering	1	C14			
<b>Mother Language</b>					
English	1	C18			
German	3	C06; C08; C15			
French	5	C02; C03; C04; C05; C16; C19			
Italian	11	C01; C07; C09; C10; C11; C12; C13; C14; C17; C20			

The gender was divided into two groups: male and female. The number of male participants (n=12) is slightly superior to that of the female participants (n=8). Age groups were divided into three categories, considering that only individuals who were 18 or more than 18 years old were interviewed. Further, education level was categorized into five groups: secondary school and apprenticeship, high school, higher education institutions (e.g., HF – Höhere Fachschule), Bachelor, and Master/PhD, representing very different education backgrounds. Then, the current jobs were divided according to the specific service sector, and for people who are currently in education, two criteria were taken into consideration: students without student jobs and students with accessory work. In addition, individuals performed the interview in their mother language, which could be English, German, French, and Italian. Regarding the tourist experience backgrounds, the length of the trip was divided into three ranges: between three and six nights, between seven and thirteen nights, and fourteen or more than fourteen nights. Trips with a journey of fewer than three nights were not asked. Important for this study is to know if the participants traveled alone or accompanied. Therefore, four categories were created: spouse/partner, friends, family members, and alone. Additionally, just recent experiences dated within the last three years were required. Finally, the trip occasion was divided into five groups: vacation/holidays, work, study, language journeys, and others.

## 5.2 Motivation

As described in Chapter 3.2, motivation to choose a specific destination refers to internal and external motives (Antón et al., 2017). The participants in this study confirmed both options, but in general external influences played a major role.

In the first case, few participants shared that the motivation to choose a destination was independent of external influences, however, was driven by personal needs.

One of the interviewees explained that the idea of choosing the trip destination did not come from external factors, however, it was spontaneous and was generated by the personal willingness to fulfill the need to do sport:

*I just thought of something a bit strenuous, arduous, and sporty. I have hardly ever been to Africa and then suddenly Kilimanjaro came to mind. Spontaneous (C15).*

Another respondent, who works in the hospitality service as a cardiovascular specialist, said that the hospital where he exercises proposed a four-day trip not mandatory to Europe to participate in conferences related to the cardiovascular domain, and he decided to subscribe to it to develop his skills and extend his knowledge:



*The motivation to participate in that trip was driven by the potential for career development it offered, independently from the destination (C18).*

Moreover, another participant stated that his motivation to choose his destination was principally due to the need to visit part of the family and spend qualitative time together, especially for the most important feast days:

*Especially for traditional festivities, like Easter and Christmas, my family and I are going to Poland because my mother-in-law's family lives there. The motivation came from the willingness to spend time with my mother-in-law's family and discover the region, which is beautiful (C03).*

Whereas few respondents mentioned personal needs as their primary motivation for choosing a travel destination, the majority were influenced by the external environment, particularly by the encouragement of other actors to visit that specific location.

One of the repeatedly mentioned influences was the family members, the circle of friends, and colleagues. They influenced the focal tourist in different ways.

More interviewees narrated that the idea to travel to a city was born from simply listening to echoes from friends and colleagues, without encouraging them or advising them to spend their holidays there. In this situation, families, friends, and colleagues, without being aware, sparked interest in the tourist and stimulated further information research about the city:

*I really wanted to visit this city because I heard a lot of positive echoes from work colleagues and close friends, so that's where the idea came from to visit and discover this city. But they didn't advise me to visit Shefshaouen, they just expressed their feelings about the city (C05).*

*I was inspired by hearsay because my mum had already been to Greece when she was young, and she told my girlfriend and me that it was a beautiful place. Then I looked for more information on the internet (C11).*

On the other hand, especially in the context of a language journey or study journey, the influence of families and friends was more important to the participant in choosing the destination because they actively communicated with the respondent, providing him/her tips, opinions, and advice based on deep analysis. In addition, they were also considered as social support during this stage by the respondents, even though the focal individual had already had an idea about the destination. Following are two interesting interview extracts:

*My mum, my father, my sister, her boyfriend, my boyfriend, and a close friend helped me to choose the destination. They gave me their opinions without pressure and their main criterion was the security of the city (C17).*

*When I told my friends, but especially my parents, that I wanted to go to New York for my school internship they were very happy, and they supported me (C10).*

*People who already visited Napoli advised me to go to explore this city. That's how the idea to organize this trip came (C13).*

Beyond physical actors, the internet, social media (Instagram and TikTok), and online platforms played a crucial role. The findings show that individuals were aware of the influence of the big world of the internet on their choosing process. Online platforms that allow the creation of communities had the most significant influence on the respondents because people can post their experiences and share recommendations with others, sparking interest in the online user. The following extracts perfectly illustrate this point:

*I think that the major influence was Instagram because I saw different people's stories showing their stay in Morocco (C20).*

*The spark started on a boring train ride to Lausanne, eternal, and I was watching videos of travel blogs or otherwise blogs of guys having a working holiday experience on YouTube (C14).*

*The motivation also came from watching pictures on the internet (C11).*

To resume this section, during the phase of motivation, it is evident that the focal tourist can be subjected to the influence of various third parties: families, friends, colleagues, and the online environment under different aspects.

### **5.3 Information search and evaluation**

As described in Chapter 3.3, information search is the stage where the tourists seek information about the destination, whereas evaluation refers to the tourist's judgment of the information sources. Information search and evaluation stages are strictly related, which is why their findings are reported in the same sub-chapter.

The first finding is that the interviewees, who decided to talk about their family vacation (C03; C08, C16), reported that their past experiences in the same town helped them build their

knowledge about the destination. However, although they already had a first encounter with the city, the allure of the undiscovered encouraged them to effectuate further research:

*We learned to discover the region. In general, even though we have part of the family there, we like doing our research. We like to explore the region by ourselves and therefore we take time in advance and create an activities list (C03).*

*Nineteen years ago, my wife and I were already for two months in Nepal. So, we already had a first knowledge about the city. This helped us naturally. Then we still googled information on the internet and watched videos on YouTube (C08).*

During this stage, the findings also showed that individuals do not limit their research to one information source but collect information from multiple channels. Here are some examples:

*We watched a lot on the internet, customers' reviews, videos on YouTube, and past experiences of other tourists (C16).*

*I got information from colleagues, social media, and Google searches (C18).*

One common source shared among all the participants was the internet (in a wide sense). In addition, regardless of the consulted internet form (social media, simple online platform, Google, etc.), almost all the respondents searched for other tourists' reviews.

Specifically, for deciding where to sleep, individuals commonly use TripAdvisor, Airbnb, Booking.com, and Google reviews. Just tourists, who organized a more complex trip, such as the study or language journey, addressed to tourist agencies (e.g., C09, C10, C15, C17). In most cases, people trust customers' reviews on these online platforms where other tourists can post their personal opinions and rate the service. Here are some interesting extracts:

*For the stay, I consulted customers' reviews on Booking.com or Google. I trust reviews on Booking.com, first because there is a selection of people, and secondly because on the platforms only individuals who already spent the night in that specific hotel can describe the situation, therefore I imply that people know what they are talking about (C06).*

*For the hostels, we searched on Booking.com and also Airbnb (C07).*

*To decide where to stay to sleep, I used TripAdvisor a lot. Usually, my criteria were the customers' reviews, the location, and the price. But yes, the customers' reviews are fundamental (C01).*

Instead, to gather general travel information, the interviewees watched videos from other tourists, travel blogs, Instagram pages, and social media influencers, or looked up some standard sentences on Google like “what to do in, where can you do this in”. This process allowed participants to have an idea about their intended trip. Three participants were the best at explaining it:

*Perhaps, to get an idea of a destination, nowadays there are many videos made by people who do this for a living. They share their experiences, film them, upload them to their channels, and from the comfort of your home, you can get a sense of whether a trip would be right for you or not (C11).*

*On Instagram, among those videos you see, Morocco pops up. What to see in Morocco, don't miss during your trip. Those short videos tell you in two seconds what to do (C20).*

*On Google, I simply searched “what to do in Miami”, and “where to party in Miami” (C19).*

The internet was the most widely used source of information among the interviewees for four main reasons: the abundance of information, the ease of use and accessibility, the affordability, and the speed of information retrieval. Overall, people judged a source's credibility based on how often the information was repeated. However, whereas the internet has become an indispensable tool and online reviews are generally considered reliable, a subtle skepticism remains, especially regarding social media:

*I don't believe that all sources are reliable, especially since I think the social media issue is a bit sensitive right now, given that there's a lot of marketing behind it. So, let's just say that I didn't rely on just one source, one video, or one testimonial. I looked for multiple videos precisely to avoid this issue, because there have been many videos in the past where people were sponsoring certain things, and you could tell that there was compensation involved (C13).*

*I know that online there are a lot of customers' fake reviews. That's why I'm always looking for negative customer feedback to be sure that what I'm reading or seeing corresponds to reality (C07).*

*Well, I would say that when it comes to the internet and general online searches, I would say I rather trust them. However, when it comes to social media, like Instagram where people share photos and videos, I would say I trust less because it's never really the whole truth. People*

*tend to present themselves in a very positive light and embellish reality a bit. So, it's not always accurate, and sometimes it can be a bit disappointing (C04).*

*So, when you start to see that certain information is repeated or said in the same way, you understand that it's also true. Of course, there's always that small piece of information that's not quite true, or maybe it was just experienced wrong by one person (C10).*

Further, the findings indicate that individuals also turned to physical sources of information. Two actor types are chiefly important: friends and local people. In the majority of cases, the interviewees gathered information from friends who had prior experience in the city they planned to visit or from locals they had met during previous trips to the same destinations:

*I have a friend who lived for four years in New York, and he gave me some useful tips and advice. In general, I prefer finding information by listening to people, who have lived in a place, rather than third-person descriptions. This way, I can also get a sense of the negative aspects of the place (C10).*

*To get information, we contacted our Nepalese friend, met during a previous experience in Nepal, and we asked him what it was possible to do there (C08).*

Moreover, a shared feeling among the participants is that traditional word-of-mouth is more reliable than other online sources. Respondents indicate that listening to first-person experiences from friends or local contacts/acquaintances is a valuable way to collect reliable information. The following two extracts give an overview of what the participants felt.

*While videos certainly have their impact, as they are visually engaging and leave a lasting impression, I found myself relying more heavily on personal testimonies from people I know.*

*This is because they understand my travel style and preferences, making their recommendations more relevant and trustworthy (C13).*

*I could have the possibility to speak with someone who has studied in Monaco and knew her experience but honestly, I wasn't interested in exchanging with a stranger (C17).*

A group of respondents also consulted paper tourist guides, such as Lonely Planet (C14, C20) and Le Routard (C12). They stated that the information is trustworthy and is always useful to read a paper tourist guide. One participant disagreed, saying that paper tourist books are not worthwhile for financial reasons and the scarcity of quantity availability:

*I chose online resources because they met my expectations. Today, they are the richest, most reliable, and most affordable source of information. I could have gone to Payot to buy a book about Miami, but I don't think there are many options there (C19).*

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, respondents evaluate the sources of information according to their credibility, trustworthiness, availability, accessibility, and affordability. Many participants also expressed the importance of the repetition and the quality of the information:

*Even online, you don't blindly trust the first thing you read. Instead, you compare four, or five sources and see what the majority says (C12).*

*I would consider the quality of the recommendations, such as how highly people rated the location, event, visit, or restaurant (C16).*

The following table summarizes the results representing the extent to which respondents were satisfied with the recommendations, inputs, information, advice, or suggestions. To notice: C15 does not figure in Table 3, because the participant explained that she did not gather information about the place she wanted to visit. She was looking for the surprise effect. Consequently, she could not rate her satisfaction with the information sources before her experience.

*Table 3: General satisfaction with the others' inputs/information*

	1 (very dissatisfied)	2	3	4	5 (very satisfied)
<b>Respondents</b>	-	-	C04; C18	C01; C02; C03; C07; C09; C10; C11; C12; C13; C14; C17; C19; C20	C05; C06; C08; C16
<b>% (.../19 participants)</b>	0%	0%	11%	68%	21%

21% of the participants gave the rate 5 with the satisfaction with others' suggestions for two main reasons. First, they chiefly received information or tips from friends, work colleagues, or residents in that place, therefore they completely relied on the information source. Secondly, recommendations corresponded to their expectations and the information was useful.

68% of the sample rated with a 4 their level of satisfaction. A slight distrust of online information sources is the most common explanation for why participants did not attribute the highest ratings. Respondents are aware of the fake reviews and missing information. Shown below are two interesting extracts:

*I will say 4. The only thing I can tell you from a tourist's perspective is that I didn't expect the prices to be so high. That's the only thing I would have added more information about this issue... because if you're looking for information about the island of Santorini, I can assure you that you will not find any articles speaking about life expensiveness (C11).*

*I would 4 and not 5 because I remember when we arrived in the rented apartment, it was cold, and the problem was that we had a fireplace to make a fire, and it was not marked anywhere that we had to go get the wood ourselves (C03).*

Another participant also mentioned that the recommendations were very “touristic”. That means advice prepared tourist-made:

*The same thing was recommended by a lot of people just because it was tourist-made information (C20).*

In addition, participants are aware of the increasingly transparent promotional tactics employed by social media influencers. This distrust was more important for the two participants who gave a rate of 3:

*I gave 3 because not all the information you will take from social media or websites will give a 100% guarantee. Even sometimes it will disappoint you (C18).*

*I would say that I'm going down to 3 because of these social networks and these misleading images (C04).*

To summarize, individuals enter into contact with multiple information sources. Due to the importance of technology, respondents heavily rely on the vast world of the internet to look for information. Without underestimating the internet's popularity, people still have feelings of mistrust, especially towards social media influencers. In addition, the personal experiences of individuals we know continue to be a highly appreciated source of information. Then, respondents evaluate all the inputs, information, and recommendations principally referring to the credibility level of the information source.

## 5.4 Decision

Decision is the output of the previous steps: motivation, information search, and evaluation.

The findings showed two different outputs. Table 4 summarizes the influence of third parties on respondents' decisions.

*Tabelle 4: Third parties' influence on focal tourist's decision*

	1 (No influence)	2	3	4	5 (Strongly influenced)
Respondents	C15; C18; C19	C03	C06; C07; C11; C20	C01; C02; C04; C08; C12; C13; C14	C05; C09; C10; C16; C17
% of participants	15%	5%	20%	35%	25%

The first visible finding is that 60% of participants reported being significantly influenced by third parties, providing rates of 4 and 5. Generally, the information and suggestions from family members, friends, work colleagues, and the internet (in a wide sense) determined the focal tourist's decision to visit a specific place:

*I would give it a four because it was finding information that made me want to go there in person (C01).*

However, for complex and long-distance trips, the role of family and friends takes on a new dimension. They become social support for the focal tourist. The following participants expressed this point particularly well.

*The desire to learn a new language came from me, but then the external environment positively influenced me so much that I would say it was a very significant influence. My family and my friend were fundamental because I don't know if would have done it on my own (C17).*

*My family literally supported me and incentivized me a lot to go (C09).*

*I would definitely give it a four because, as I've already mentioned, the idea of leaving and traveling to far-off countries for longer periods is quite established in my family. And even if it was not actively expressed, there's also a certain push, a certain encouragement from the*



*family to go out and have my own experiences. And on social media or the internet in general, it gave me the need to have an adventure (C14).*

The second finding illustrates that 20% of the respondents rated the influence on their final decision with a 3. Two main reasons explain the evaluation of the interviewees. Firstly, they clarified that the initial motivation to choose the specific destination came from them, however, the information search process had an impact anyway on their final decision:

*The influence to go there wasn't that big, since I had the initial idea to visit that place. But the influence of the online and physical environment was certainly important in making my decision. I think it's probably a 3 (C06).*

The second motive refers to the mistrust of online recommendations, which restrains the influence on an individual's decision:

*The online environment influenced my decision, but not too much, because as I was telling you, I'm a bit critical. I mean I trust, but not too much, because I know that everyone has different perceptions (C07).*

Further, only one person responded with a grade of 2. This evaluation is justified by the fact that C03 made clear that the final decision to go to that place was linked to the presence of part of his family, therefore just a minor influence of his family members could have influenced this decision.

Finally, 15% respond with a grade of 1, which indicates no influence. The shared reason for that evaluation is that they decided on their own the destination to spend the vacation and just later searched for information about the place:

*1. Not at all. I already decided to go there and then searched for it (C15).*

*The research of information motivated me more, but I already had this in mind, so I would say a rating of 1 (C19).*

*No one, it's not the type of trip. You can choose to participate, or you can leave. The decision is on you (C18).*

To conclude this section, most participants felt influenced by online and/or physical environments.

## 5.5 Stay at the destination

This phase focuses on the tourists' experiences on-site. This stage includes activities that tourists organize and interactions with others.

The first finding is that all participants interacted with others and/or engaged in one-way communication with digital actors. On-site, individuals participate in a wide range of activities, which were organized before their departure following the received tips, reading information about the place, or were spontaneously organized in situ.

Interviewed tourists explained that other actors on-site inspired them to put the activity on their list. These "other actors" include Google (search engine), travel blogs, social media influencers, social media pages, tourist organizations on-site, other tourists, local people, and hotel staff.

Participants had different levels of communication with all these third parties on-site. Considering Google, travel blogs, social media pages, and social media influencers, in general, respondents passively read and consulted these sources to get some tips from travelers who already visited the city and had an idea about the best activities to do at the destination. Here are some passages extrapolated from the interviews:

*On-site we had to do even more research, but we actually did that spontaneously. We didn't plan anything in advance that we wanted to see, but instead, we informed ourselves there, simply googling, and then decided every day what to do next (C08).*

*For the activities, I simply wrote on Google "what to visit in Morocco" and then I compared the different websites on-site (C20).*

*On-site I did my research also through travel blogs (C14).*

*For some activities on-site, I informed myself on the internet, trivially searching "the best restaurants in Santorini" (C11).*

*Work colleagues gave me before my departure some tips on what to do in Paris, but on-site I consulted Google and social media pages to discover the most famous places to visit (C18).*

On the other hand, tourists also experienced true interactions with other tourists, local people, and hotel staff. In this case, findings revealed two different roles adopted by other tourists, residents, and hotel service employees.

Firstly, most of the participants explained that unexpected encounters with other tourists, residents, or hotel service employees were helpful because they informed them about some activities, restaurants, or places to visit:

*Americans organize open cinemas in the parks or boat parties, and other foreign students like me informed me about these activities (C09).*

*I have noticed that some hotels offer a concierge service. With this service, you can ask the concierge for recommendations on activities or secret places (C16).*

Specifically, one of the most interesting findings is that participants expressed that purposely they were looking for interactions with locals to have the most accurate information, know the secrets of the place, do authentic activities, or visit exclusive places that normally tourists do not consider. The following excerpts illustrate this research on networking with locals:

*When I was there (in Finland), I celebrated their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence. Each year, people get a sauna and after that, they jump into the frozen lake. This really means to enter into their mood and do their traditions (C09).*

*We took part in an exhibition of traditional dances, visited a Spice Garden where medicine students cultivated their plants, which serve as natural medicines, and had a cooking class with their local products. To participate in all these activities, we actively asked the local people (C12).*

*When I arrived there, I asked the locals directly what there is to see and do, and anything else that's interesting. First, I believe that locals are the ones who can provide the most accurate information because they live in that city. Secondly, they can recommend things that you won't find in tourist guidebooks or on websites because they have a deeper understanding of the city and its culture (C05).*

Secondly, a considerable number of the interviewees stated that especially the interactions with other tourists, locals, and/or hotel staff were not just limited to small talk. The respondents narrated that they built closer and deeper relationships with them. All parties were curious to know better each other:

*I was with the guide Safari and other tourists, and we spent time for the whole week together. The interactions with them were so open and kind. They were fun and had a lot of joy and vitality (C15).*

*We were invited to lunch at the home of the tuk-tuk driver who had taken us around for the day. He was super nice, and we had a wonderful time together with his family. We were completely immersed in their Sri Lankan culture (C12).*

*So, I remember talking to an American, a Japanese person, and other people who at the end of the day were in the hotel hall to share their experiences. We were talking about why we came to visit the city, what we were interested in, what we liked and didn't like. I had interactions with tourists from all over the world (C05).*

*I really liked the paella dinner because I noticed the enthusiasm and dedication of the hotel staff. They organized everything for people and were excited to share this cultural tradition with us, explaining its history, origins, significance, and customs. It was a true cultural immersion (C07).*

*I really bonded with the people I went surfing with because we spent the whole week together (C02).*

Interestingly to observe is that one participant explained that she did not have the chance to engage in more deep discussions with local people, and she felt disappointed about this lack. Here is the original speaking extract:

*The interactions were quite superficial, so we weren't able to have deeper conversations with them. That can be a bit disappointing (C04).*

Some participants also further expressed that local people and other tourists were social support for them. Here are some extracts that perfectly elucidate this need of the focal tourist to connect with others and interact with them to fulfill a psychological need.

*I stopped by a restaurant and there was only this guy inside. The restaurant was closed, but the guy invited me inside, and in the end, although the restaurant was closed, he cooked me a carbonara and we chatted for like three or four hours. I needed these interactions, but also the locals felt this need to socialize and they were happy to speak with me since it was the Covid period (C01).*

*Interactions with locals were fundamental for me. I did many activities with them. They supported me. For instance, I was following on Instagram the Place page, but not always it was written in English. So, they helped me to translate (C09).*

Finally, Table 5 below illustrates the general satisfaction of interviewees with the interactions on-site.

*Table 5: Satisfaction of tourists with interactions on-site*

	1 (very dissatisfied)	2	3	4	5 (very satisfied)
<b>Respondents</b>	C18	-	C03; C04; C16; C17	C01; C02; C06; C07; C10; C12; C14; C20	C05; C08; C09; C11; C13; C15; C19
<b>% of participants</b>	5%	0%	20%	40%	35%

The findings showed that for the majority of respondents (75%), the interactions with others were positive and met their expectations. 20% of the participants rated their satisfaction with a 3. The reasons given to explain this evaluation were diverse in nature. One participant stated that:

*The reason I didn't rate the interaction with the others very highly is because of the approach they took, which I don't particularly appreciate. There was like a fake enthusiasm. This kind of behavior makes me want to distance myself. I prefer a more detached relationship where you suggest, and I freely choose whether or not to do it. On the other hand, the interaction with my new friend was good and relaxed, with the freedom to decide without pressure (C17).*

Two interviewees explained that:

*We were a lot between us, it was just family. We saw other people doing the same activities, but they were from a different group, they weren't with us (C03)*

*People were nice, pleasant, and cool, but our interactions were anyway superficial. We didn't have more deep exchanges. We met a man who advised us to go to a very atypical restaurant and to have this tip, it was likable (C04).*

And the last one said:

*We already had a full program, so we didn't have time to follow the inputs from other people. So, it was difficult to change our program or do something more. Therefore, I would say 3 (C16).*

Finally, one participant gave the number 1 to rate the interactions with other people. The main reason is the impoliteness of locals and their unwillingness to help the focal tourist. Here is an extract from the interview:

*I went to a restaurant, and I asked for my coffee, then the waitress spoke with me in French. I repeated to her many times that I don't speak French, but it was like I wasn't visible. Then, I went out and went to a second restaurant and the behavior was the same. I felt like people didn't want to speak English (C18).*

In conclusion, the findings show that during a tourist experience, individuals are in touch with different actors. The intensity of the interactions and the role of the third parties can also vary.

## 5.6 Satisfaction and sharing

As described in Chapter 3.7, tourist satisfaction is determined by the extent to which trip expectations and programmed and unexpected on-site activities are fulfilled and met. Instead, sharing the experience represents the next step after satisfaction (Zeng & Li, 2021). As their bonded sequence, their findings are reported in the same sub-chapter.

Table 6 below portrays the level of satisfaction of the participants with the overall tourist experience.

*Tabelle 6: Level of satisfaction with the overall tourist experience*

	1 (very dissatisfied)	2	3	4	5 (very satisfied)
<b>Respondents</b>	-	-	C02; C17	C03; C04; C07; C11; C13; C18; C20	C01; C05; C06; C08; C09; C10; C12; C14; C15; C16; C19
<b>% of participants</b>	0%	0%	10%	35%	55%

The results clearly show that almost all participants were satisfied and very satisfied with their overall experience (90%). Only 10% rated with a grade of 3. The evaluation justification is pretty fragmented; however, some participants shared the comment that interactions on-site and the veracity of the search for information before departing as well as in situ impacted their evaluation of the level of satisfaction. It can be negative or positive. For instance, the

following participants explained that their experiences were less graded (instead of a 5, they rated with a 4) because of some negative interactions during the trip:

*I chose to give a four instead of a five because we didn't feel very secure during the night, and we asked the hotel staff for an emergency number. They started to laugh, and they told us that nothing ever happens here and nothing ever will (C07).*

*The conference and the architecture of the city were awesome, however, the negative interactions with locals negatively impacted my overall tourist experience (C18).*

*Locals were trying to sell you everything. They put pressure on you. They would have even sold you the house if they could have (C20).*

Other interviewees expressed their deception because of the lack of important information online and because their expectations after the experiences were not fully met:

*The destination was super. Interactions with people there were very good. However, I was disappointed with the hotel services, like the quality of the food, the quality of the proposed surf activities, and the night's activities. In addition, the surf activity did not conform 100% with what was written and communicated on the internet websites (C02).*

*So, it was a wonderful experience, but honestly, I think tourists should be better informed about the high prices in Santorini (C11).*

*My grade is 3 because I achieved my objective of learning German, but I discovered that the agency that organized my journey was not serious. I mean school in Germany was a lot for young people, it was very playful and not so serious (C17).*

In contrast to the previous testimonials, many interviewees found their encounters on-site so enriching that they felt enhanced the entire tourist experience. In addition, they were also satisfied with the inputs and the reliability of the source of information that they consulted before and during the experience. The following extracts describe this point:

*There were no negative moments at all. I didn't experience any negative interactions with anyone. There wasn't a single thing that happened that ruined my day or my experience exploring this city. So, it was a truly positive experience overall (C05).*

*My experience was really good. There were sunny, people were nice. I could also speak the local language, and for me, it's definitely important to be able to communicate with others and express myself (C06).*

*My experience was the best decision I could have made. It has helped me grow personally. I met so many people and learned how to interact with others and with people from different backgrounds (C14).*

*The people were super friendly, super nice. I was always served and received very helpfully everywhere, and it was fun (C15).*

*The locals were very warm and nice. In general, the environment was superb (C19).*

Another important finding is that all respondents shared their experiences with others. The difference lies in how they shared their experiences. Most of the participants told their vacation to their friends, family, and work colleagues, as well as they posted some pictures on Instagram. Only one participant (C02) was so disappointed about the offered services at the place that decided to share their deception by writing a comment online and answering an online satisfaction questionnaire. In addition, generally, individuals are ready to become ambassadors of their experience and offer their help just in a familiar, small, friendly circle. They are not ready to become social traveler influencers, communicating and commenting on their experiences online rather than just posting pictures. Here are listed some extracts:

*Honestly, I wouldn't want to share this on social media, but I would share it with my friends, family, and colleagues (C05).*

*I would share my experiences with my family, friends, and work colleagues but absolutely not on social media. I think my experience can help others because I spent some time there and I know the city. I can advise what to do and what you can ignore. And I discovered some places that aren't so popular (C06).*

*I can influence my friends and incentivize them. I can become the guide now. But I would not do more on social media than posting a few pictures on my personal account (C09).*

*I would totally recommend this experience to anyone interested, even actively encouraging them to go for it. Even if they have some fears or doubts, I would be happy to push them a bit out of their comfort zone (C14).*

Even though the majority of the participants want to limit the sharing and support to other potential tourists to a small circle, few respondents interestingly expressed the desire to spread their influence on social media and the internet:



*For example, you can write a review, either on social media or elsewhere, citing both negative and positive points (C03).*

*On social media, people asked me about my experience, and I recommended the destination because it's a super place (C04).*

*If I imagine posting pictures of my entire experience, I think I would show the whole island in a video. I would show it in a fun way, with my girlfriend and me on the scooter, showing the best moments (C11).*

Table 7 illustrates the willingness of the participants to advise their experience to the others.

*Table 7: Participants' willingness to spread word-of-mouth (WOM/e-WOM)*

	1 (completely disagree)	2	3	4	5 (completely agree)
<b>Respondents</b>	-	C18	-	C02; C06; C07; C11; C13; C14; C17; C20	C01; C03; C04; C05; C08; C09; C10; C12; C15; C16; C19
<b>% of participants</b>	-	5%	-	40%	55%

The findings show that 95% of the respondents would recommend their experience between grades 4 and 5. Specifically, participants prefer spreading classical WOM rather than e-WOM. The only participant who gave a very low rate (2) justified the evaluation by stating:

*As I was disappointed with the community's behavior there, I would not recommend this destination to someone else (C18).*

Additionally, every participant communicated that their experiences could help others in different ways. Below are represented the most interesting ideas:

*I think my experience can help other tourists. Indeed, I took many visit cards from the restaurants where I lunched, and I distributed them and recommended the place (C01).*

*We have a lot of contacts that could be helpful. I was in Nepal for two months nineteen years ago and then again for three weeks, so I can share my experiences and insights. I still have contact with a local guide who manages a tracking agency, which can always be helpful when it comes to finding addresses and other information (C08).*

*I think if I show my experience in a video, I can motivate other people to go there (C11).*

*Naples has always had a particular reputation, and people have often been a little bit afraid to travel there. So, I think my experience can certainly help to alleviate some of those fears (C13).*

*This type of trip is convenient if you are a flexible traveler, so I think my experience can be helpful because I can be an example (C15).*

Finally, Table 8 presents the results of the participants' willingness to repeat their experience / revisit the place.

*Table 8: Results of participant's willingness to revisit their chosen destination*

	1 (completely disagree)	2	3	4	5 (completely agree)
<b>Respondents</b>	C18	-	C01; C11	C02; C03; C04; C06; C07; C08; C13; C17; C20	C05; C09; C10; C12; C14; C15; C16; C19
<b>% of participants</b>	5%	-	10%	45%	40%

The results show that most of the participants (85%) are highly willing to repeat their tourist experiences. Then, 10% evaluated their intention with a 3. Finally, only one participant gave a grade of 1. This latter one explained that his negative experience with local people negatively influenced his willingness to come back to the destination.

In conclusion, the findings revealed that different third parties influence the experience satisfaction of tourists. Moreover, individuals generally prefer sharing their experiences on a small scale. However, they are ready to help others, providing information, tips, and advice. They would expose not just the positive points of a city, but also the negative ones. Further, they would offer their support if asked.

## VI. DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Summary of the study

This qualitative study investigates the third-party actors' influence on the co-creation of the tourism experience. Semi-structured interviews were used to understand in-depth the entire tourist experience. This latter one is viewed through the concept of the customer journey. Seven phases were considered for the analysis: motivation, information search, evaluation, decision, satisfaction, and sharing.

Based on the analysis, the most important findings can be represented in the following table (Table 9).

*Table 9: Findings' resume*

	Involved third parties	The most influent third parties	Third parties influence types
<b>Pre-experience (motivation, information search, evaluation, decision)</b>	Friends, families, work colleagues, internet (Google), online platforms, social networks (Instagram, TikTok), online communities, paper tourist guides, locals.	Internet (Google), online communities, friends.	Interest sparker, information source, tips suggester (advisor)
<b>During the experience (stay at the destination)</b>	Locals, online platforms, internet (Google), social media (Instagram), paper tourist guides, other tourists, hotel staff/front-line service employees.	Locals, other tourists.	Tip suggester (advisor), social supporter, travel partner
<b>Post-experience (satisfaction and sharing)</b>	Locals, internet (Google), friends, families, work colleagues, social media (Instagram), other tourists.	Other tourists, locals, friends.	Satisfaction enhancer/dissatisfaction inducer, connector/listener

### 6.2 Interpretation of the findings and comparison with the literature

The findings of this study indicated that multiple third parties influence the tourist during each step of the journey. In addition, they actively collaborate with the focal tourist to co-create the tourist's experience.

### *Families, friends, and work colleagues*

Although the few literature dedicated to the families and influences on the touristic experience co-creation process, part of the findings are aligned with the existing studies. First, families and friends are precious sources of information. They can help the focal tourist by providing information and inputs. Secondly, their WOM is evaluated by tourists as more reliable than online resources. However, this study further demonstrates that their presence is not limited to being informers. They spark a destination interest in tourists, motivating them to choose a specific destination (interest sparker). In addition, they offer their moral support in case of long journeys (e.g., study, language, working holiday journey). They encourage the focal tourist to go and they actively take part in his/her decision process. Then, this research also highlights the importance of the influence of work colleagues, though the influence of friends and family remains stronger. Many participants mentioned coworkers' influence during the motivation and information search phases. In the existing literature, they are often just cited but not considered for the analysis. Moreover, the influence of families, friends, and work colleagues is relevant for the post-experience phases. Their initial information and inputs can definitely enhance/reduce their satisfaction level with the overall experience, as per the level of meeting expectations. Further, they listen to the narration of the tourists' experiences or comment on their posts on Instagram, generating additional value for the focal tourist. Finally, the major influence is exercised by friends. Except for the complex journeys, where the support from family is more fundamental than that from friends and colleagues, friends are among the most important third parties, which influence the pre-experience and post-experience of the focal tourist.

### *Online Platforms, Online Communities, Internet*

Even though the existing tourism literature lacks specific discussion on the influence of online platforms, online communities, and the internet on experience co-creation process along the customer's journey phases, some findings are consistent with the broader literature. First, these third parties are important for the experience co-creation process during the pre-experience and post-experience steps. They deliver fundamental information and advice to the focal tourist. Online users share their experiences, by providing reviews on sleeping places, restaurants, cities, culture, and activities at the destination. Furthermore, they can motivate/demotivate individuals to visit a place. Another finding that is consistent with the existing literature is that people evaluate online platforms, online communities, and the internet enough credible but they are aware of the presence of fake news, misleading

information, or missing information. Therefore, they carefully choose information and tips found in the online world. They can have the power to influence the final decision to travel to a specific place. However, as the current literature affirmed, individuals do not just consider others' opinions to make the final decision. The budget is one of the most relevant external factors. Moreover, initial online customers' reviews and online stimuli can influence the tourist's satisfaction level after the experience. Going more into the details, this research further revealed that online platforms, online communities, and the internet can also play a role during the on-site experience. Individuals passively consume content, looking for information and tips about activities, sleeping places, or the city in situ. Tourists usually search for unique and distinctive activities and attractions. From the realized interviews, it is possible to imply that Google is one of the most used search engines. When interviewees mentioned "the internet" as an information source, individuals often referred to Google, which provides free access to travel blogs, online platforms, and online communities. Instead, existing studies consider the Internet in a broad sense. In conclusion, this study discovered that the internet (more understood as Google) and online communities are among the most influential third parties during the pre-experience stage. This is explained by the fact that individuals especially to get inspiration and search for information directly consult these sources and enough trust them to follow their tips.

### *Social media influencers*

The choice to separate social media influencers from the other's online sources is that the findings highlight some important differences. As online platforms, online communities, and the internet (Google), social networks accompany the tourists throughout their entire journey. Aligned with the current literature, tourists also inform themselves on social media (e.g., Instagram, TikTok), seek unique tips, and watch others' stories (during the pre-experience and experience on-site phases). Nevertheless, the existing tourism literature presents a discrepancy about the social media influencers' influence on destination decisions. Some authors (e.g., Gurreiro, 2019) state that social media influencers' influence is not among the most relevant factors to impact the tourist's decision-making process. Other researchers (e.g., Alic et al., 2017) demonstrated the opposite. The findings of this master's thesis are closer to the first idea. A general atmosphere of mistrust of social media influencers is observed. Tourists perceive this sense of fakeness with social media influencers more than with other online sources. This is because influencers may be financially encouraged to promote a place or activity, leading tourists to trust drastically less their shared content. Aligned with the results

of the existing literature is that social media can influence tourists in the final experience stage as well. Tourists who already used social media in the pre-experience phase are more likely to post their experience (e.g., pictures) on social media. In conclusion, the perceived sense of fakeness surrounding social media influencers leads them not to be among the most influential third parties in any phase.

#### *Paper tourist guides*

The influence of paper tourist guides (e.g., Lonely Planet) is almost missing in the tourism literature. This research revealed that they can still be important for some tourists, especially during the information search and stay at the destination steps. This is because paper guides are considered trustworthy and rich in information. However, their influence appears superficial and cannot represent this study's sample.

#### *Local communities*

Locals' influence differs from the different experience phases. During the pre-experience stage, local influence is minimal because it is more difficult for tourists to get in touch with residents unless they have contacts from previous experiences in that destination. However, their major influence is exerted during the stay at the destination and post-experience phases. In line with the results in the literature, this study confirmed the tourists' willingness to interact with the guest population. Individuals seek tips, suggestions, and advice, however, they also look for social relationships. Indeed, tourists expressed the desire to branch out of the "tourist setting" and approach closer to local people. They are curious about their culture, traditions, food, risks, etc. They need to have a truly authentic experience. In this situation, local people can strongly enrich tourists' experience if their interactions with them are positive. Indeed, according to existing studies, social contact with residents is a key element in generating unique and magical experiences for tourists. Then, locals are viewed as social support, especially for solo travelers. Networking with local communities strongly influences the focal tourist's willingness to spread negative or positive WOM or to post pictures on social media. In conclusion, local people are viewed as highly influential third parties during the on-site experience and post-experience phases, playing a key role in the experience co-creation.

### *Other tourists on-site*

Other tourists' influence is relevant for the following phases: stay at the destination and post-experience. The findings are consistent with the literature on tourist-to-tourist interactions in situ. The focal tourist looks for contacts with other tourists, who experience the same activity. Their interactions can be superficial, providing tips, advice, or information (information source). However, they can engage in deep conversation and become travel partners. Both parties desire to know more about each other backgrounds, cultures, and personalities. Indeed, the focal tourist and other tourists, on some occasions, bond in tight friendship. Furthermore, tourist-to-tourist interactions are crucial for the experience co-creation process because they can provide social value and benefits to both parties. These interactions can directly impact the focal tourist's satisfaction with the overall touristic experience. They can also influence his/her willingness to spread negative or positive WOM or to post pictures on social media. To resume, other tourists are considered among the most influential third parties during the on-site experience and post-experience.

### *Hotel staff, front-line service employees*

The literature on hotel staff/front-line service employees as third parties is practically nonexistent. This master's thesis highlights their increasing presence as third parties in the co-creation of experiences process. Above all, during the experience on-site, they can suggest activities and places to the focal tourist or provide them with important information about the city. Their interactions with the focal tourists can also slightly influence tourists' overall satisfaction with the experience. To conclude, hotel staff / front-line service employees are not listed among the most influential third parties in the co-creation process. They play a secondary role.

## **6.3 Theoretical and managerial contributions**

The findings of this study contribute to evolving tourism literature on experience co-creation and are beneficial for all stakeholders of the tourism industry.

From a theoretical perspective, firstly, this research is the first study that approaches experience co-creation by integrating the concept of the customer journey to discover third parties' influence on co-creation. Second, this master's thesis considers seven phases of the tourist journey, allowing a better understanding of when other actors influence the experience co-creation. In addition, this qualitative study contributes to extending knowledge on third parties by identifying who those third parties are, when they influence the focal tourist, and

how they influence him/her throughout the customer journey. Moreover, this study helps cover the gap in the literature on third parties that is fragmented and lacks a holistic perspective, overlooking the contributions of the different actors in influencing experience co-creation.

From a managerial perspective, this study empowers tourist service providers to develop an overall comprehension of the tourist journey, recognizing that various third parties can differently influence travelers throughout the entire experience. This allows them to adapt their selling strategy based on third parties' influence during the tourist's experience phases. For instance, during the pre-experience, if the firms adopt a digital marketing strategy, they should pay attention to choosing social media influencers and manage sponsored blog posts. They should collaborate with social media endorsers who are authentic, credible, and appear genuinely engaged with their audience, ensuring transparency and avoiding practices that manipulate customers. Moreover, tourist companies can use the findings of this study to introduce social listening as a marketing tool to identify influential voices and track tourists' trends. This allows them to bond more aimed collaborations with other stakeholders and better understand tourists' preferences. Further, tourist firms should consider the important influence of local people, especially on-site. Tourist agencies should propose experiences where the focal tourist can interact with residents and overpass the tourist setting. They should organize activities where the encounter between locals and tourists is privileged. This is advantageous for both parties since both can offer social support and learn something from each other. Another option is to develop partnerships with local guides, by leveraging their local knowledge to build memorable experiences and facilitate engagement by immersing tourists in the experience. They should also be trained to deliver personalized recommendations, enhancing the tourist's experience.

Then, informing hotel staff and front-line service employees about the city's culture, traditions, and peculiar spaces empowers them to build a deeper interaction with customers. In this manner, tourists are more willing to spread positive WOM, by sharing their experience with others and/or posting pictures of the place. Hotel staff should also promote interactions between tourists and encourage them to participate in activities together. Hotel staff should help to co-create the experience. However, not just hotel staff should make an effort, tourist agencies should also offer a journey, including a list of activities where the focal tourist has the chance to meet other tourists on special occasions and share a lovely moment. These encounters should not be forced but encouraged. This allows the focal tourist to enhance



satisfaction and spread positive WOM. This approach also fulfills the social need to interact with others and make new friends.

Considering the weight of the internet (Google), online platforms, online communities, and online blogs, tourist firms must be aware that nowadays the accessibility to information is immediate, free, and easy. Furthermore, firms should find an innovative way to communicate with tourists. One of these possible ways is the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) in the tourist journey, especially for the motivation phase, as an interviewee (C01) also mentioned. On the other hand, the data collected also revealed the significance of online travel communities. Firms should create their own online travel communities, where people can freely exchange, share content, and interact with ex-travelers, generating value for all involved actors.

Additionally, even though findings demonstrate that the major influence on tourists is friends, this research also shows the importance of families and work colleagues. Tourist firms can leverage this information. They can find a way to include all these actors, especially, during the pre-experience phase. A recommendation can be to propose a collaborative planning tool where the tourists can add them as collaborators.

Tourist companies can leverage the findings of this study to develop an omnichannel communication strategy. This strategy implies a seamless integration of online and offline communication channels by providing a unified tourist experience. Following this strategy is important to create personalized content and offer a unique customer experience.

Finally, tourist firms can adapt their strategy according to the trip styles. Especially for solo travelers, the local community can be more important than for tourists with a travel companion because they seek social connections and social support. Therefore, tourist agencies, for this trip category, can prioritize experiences that facilitate interactions with residents. For long travels, family and friends play a different role: they are not just tip suggesters, they are also social support for the focal tourist. Hence, tourist companies should find a different strategy for this travel category in a way that they prioritize the engagement of families and friends in the pre-experience phase. Whereas for family trips, the family members also influence the destination decision, activities on site decision, and final satisfaction. Tourist firms should create a tourist journey where all group members can be involved and give their contributions.

## VII. CONCLUSION

### 7.1 Limitations of the study

This study also represents some limitations.

#### *Sample age*

15 participants out of 20 are in the group aged between 24 and 29. With a better distribution of the participants in the different age categories, the study findings may be generalized to a wider range of tourists. Individuals aged between 18 and 23 or more than 30 may have another travel style, therefore their approach to the experience phases can be different.

#### *Lack of negative experiences*

The interview guide does not impose the choice between a positive or negative experience, however, 90% of the respondents preferred sharing a globally positive experience. Hence, the findings of this study highlight more positive aspects of the experience co-creation rather than negative aspects.

#### *Duration of the interviews*

Interviews were conducted remotely on teams and with an estimated time of 30 minutes. Some respondents were unable to exceed 20 minutes as they tried to calculate each answer given to a specific question. This made the collection of exhaustive information more difficult.

#### *The chosen context*

This study focuses on the tourism sector. Despite the important contribution to tourism research, this study should consider other sectors where the experience assumes the same value in order to compare the findings and lead to broader validity.

### 7.2 Future research

For further research, it seems interesting to study the third parties' influence on experience co-creation across different sectors (education, entertainment, healthcare), where the experience assumes a particular importance, to expand the understanding of the topic and compare the findings. This leads to discovering other valuable insights and the possibility of confirming a

broader findings' application. Moreover, by expanding the research field to other sectors, the chance that individuals are willing to tell also negative experiences is increased.

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## APPENDIX

### 1. Interview guide

#### 1.1 Introduction

##### **Introduction.**

During a tourist experience, the customer enters in touch with multiple actors. The classic and main relationship between the customer and the tourist company/agency is not the only one that can influence the customer's experience. Frequently, the customer collaborates with other third parties to create unique experiences. In this study, my goal is to understand who these other actors are, when and how they influence the customer. In this context, we are interested in your entire touristic experience which includes three or more nights away from home.

*Your participation in this survey is anonymous. Your responses will be used strictly for scientific purposes. Please note that you can stop the interview at any time and can choose not to answer any of the following questions. I thank you in advance for your valuable collaboration!*

#### 1.2 General questions






1. Please choose one of your touristic experiences (dated within the last 2-3 years) that involves three or more nights away from home.
2. Describe your experience from the moment of the conception/the idea until your return from the trip.

#### 1.3 Pre-experience questions






Motivation: you need inspiration to choose a travel destination.

1. How did you get inspired?
2. How did the influence of others, distal or proximal, change your motivation to choose a destination?
3. Did you follow the inputs?

- Information search: you need information about your destination.
  1. Did you turn to different sources of information for various inputs (e.g., social media influencers or proximal others, such as friends)?
  2. Why did you choose these sources of information?
- Evaluation
  1. Which criteria did you use to evaluate all inputs coming from others?
  2. Did you trust all your sources of information? Were these sources of information credible? Please provide as many details as possible.
  3. Did you follow the inputs?
  4. Were you satisfied with the given inputs? (very dissatisfied – very satisfied)






				
1	2	3	4	5

- Evaluation
  1. Which criteria did you use to evaluate all inputs coming from others?
  2. Did you trust all your sources of information? Were these sources of information credible? Please provide as many details as possible.
  3. Did you follow the inputs?
  4. Were you satisfied with the given inputs? (very dissatisfied – very satisfied)

				
1	2	3	4	5

## 1.4 Experience on-site questions

1. Did you participate in on-site experience activities? Which?
2. Who informs you about that activity/these activities?
3. During this activity, you probably had various interactions with others. Who? How? Please provide as many details as possible and give adjectives to describe these interactions.
4. Were you satisfied with those interactions? (very dissatisfied – very satisfied)

				
1	2	3	4	5

## 1.5 Post-experience questions

### - Satisfaction and sharing

1. Were you satisfied with your experience overall?

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5

2. Did you share your experience with someone? Please give as many details as possible.

3. Will you advise your experience to someone else? (completely disagree – completely agree)

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5

4. Do you think that your experience can help other people? In which way?

5. To what extent would you be willing to influence other people?

6. Will you redo the experience? (completely disagree – completely agree)

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5

## 1.6 Socio-demographic information

### Socio-demographic Information.

1. Age	
2. Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Man <input type="checkbox"/> Woman <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> I prefer not to answer
3. Level of education	
4. Actual Job	
5. Number of travelers	
6. Duration of the trip	
7. Trip occasion	
8. Date of the trip	



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## DECLARATION

Par ma signature, j'atteste avoir rédigé personnellement ce travail écrit et n'avoir utilisé que les sources et moyens autorisés, et mentionné comme telles les citations et paraphrases.

J'ai pris connaissance de la décision du Conseil de Faculté du 09.11.2004 l'autorisant à me retirer le titre conféré sur la base du présent travail dans le cas où ma déclaration ne correspondrait pas à la vérité.

De plus, je déclare que ce travail ou des parties qui le composent, n'ont encore jamais été soumis sous cette forme comme épreuve à valider, conformément à la décision du Conseil de Faculté du 18.11.2013.

Fribourg, le 09.05.2024

  
.....  
(signature)