Editorial to the special issue of TPD *Revisiting value co-creation and co-destruction in tourism development*

*By Elena Cavagnaro, Eleni Michopoulou and Nikolaos Pappas*

As COVID-19 has shown in a way unimaginable before it hit, tourism is susceptible to uncertainty and incidents that can directly impact the supply and demand of its discretionary products and services. Before the pandemic, consensus had been reached among practitioners and academics that consumer experience is more important than ever for enterprises as well as destinations, as the sector had become globalised, reached maturity and became highly competitive. Tourism came to a grinding halt due to the pandemic and recovery may take years. Still, the pathway to success (or failure) lies on the overall satisfaction of visitors and tourists, which heavily depends on perceived value; a concept that can be co-created or co-destroyed by the very interaction between all social actors and stakeholders involved. Value creation or destruction is critical not just for traditional supply and demand, but also for an array of actors across value and distribution chains (including for example staff and intermediaries across the networks). The special issue’s aim was to assist the better understanding of value co-creation and co-destruction in tourism development by bringing together different perspectives and disciplines.

Judging from the diversity of the theoretical perspectives of the articles collected in this issue and the richness of the presented findings the special issue has indeed achieved its aim. Yet some red treads could be distinguished: the relevance of online communication and information; the importance of interpersonal encounters and social interaction for value co-creation and co-destruction in tourism; and the challenges in the design and delivery process of co-created experiences.

*Information, communication and automation technology in a people-oriented sector*

The importance of user generated content on social media for value co-creation and, particularly, co-destruction in tourism is underlined by Aaron Tham in his study entitled ‘Revisiting Online Tourism Forums as Vehicles for Value Co-Destruction’. Tham explores trolling episodes on Lonely Planet Thorn Tree forums and the response of troll’s victims. Trolling episodes bait, shame, and antagonize other social media users by framing seemingly innocent content in a provoking way or insolently responding to other users’ content. Trolling is a form of cyberbullying and has got the attention of, for example, education but not yet of tourism researchers. However, trolling episodes potentially inflict serious damage to a destination or brand image because they are anonymous, shared on (trusted) forums and in the public view of potential visitors. Victims are not defenceless, though, as Tam’s study shows, and may lower the value-destruction effects of a trolling episode by employing one, or a combination of three approaches - ignoration, rebuttal and re-orientation.

Orea-Giner, De-Pablos-Heredero and Vacas-Guerrero insist on the importance of studying value co-creation and co-destruction in the context of the information, communication, and automation revolution that is leading to the so-called Industry 4.0 era. Particularly, they focus on online word-of-moth (eWOM) communication to understand museum attributes that are relevant to visitors and promote co-creation during the whole visitors’ journey. Unsurprisingly, the collection is seen as the most important core attribute of the analyzed museum. Compared to existing literature, though, the study’s results uncover the importance of Industry 4.0 attributes in peripheral services such as an App and a Website. Interestingly, though, non-Industry 4.0 attributes such as toilets, a luggage storage, and accessibility are also enumerated among the new findings. While value may be cocreated through enhancing these services, the study also discovered some contested attributes (such as the ticket price and the museum’s identity that some locals perceive as extraneous) that could lead to value co-destruction.

*Interpersonal encounters and social interaction*

Glyptou’s contribution investigates the case of Lesvos, a Greek destination in a sustained crisis since the arrival of the first refugees and immigrants in 2012. Research tends to concentrate on a crisis’ peak leaving almost unexplored the tourists’ response and engagement with the process of image co-creation for destinations in sustained crisis. In an holistic model, Glyptou proposes that tourism engagement in the image co-creation of such destinations is dependent on the pre-visit and during visit destination image, and the overall quality and intensity of interactions tourists had at destination with other tourists, local, and refugees, as well as their inclinations to create and share content on social media. Findings are very rich. Among these we would like to point to the role of pre-visit perception of the host community and to interpersonal encounters at the destination. A positive affective image of the host-community trumps tourists’ concern for their safety and induces them to visit the destination - an essential first step for the recovery of a destination’s image. Encounters during the visit were the most significant variable directly related to image co-creation. In the light of the present crisis, one may suggest that host-communities that are known for being particularly welcoming and hospitable will be the first to recover.

Xing Han, Carolus Praet and Liyong Wang open a window on the Chinese outbound tourists and how social interaction with previously unknown other tourists shape their perception of value co-creation and co-destruction. Whilst the direct or indirect presence of other tourists impacts on the tourism experience has been well discussed, the impact has been mainly framed as conductive of vale co-creation. However, Han et al. findings imply that value co-destruction is a real danger particularly in indirect interactions (those interactions that occur without explicit verbal on non-verbal communication between tourists). Negatively perceived encounters mostly occurred when the environment was considered to be crowded, reflecting the negative impact of over-tourism not only on the host community but also – though paradoxically - on the tourists themselves. Counterintuitively, the presence of tourists of the same nationality strengthened respondents’ perception that value (in this case the authenticity of the place) is destroyed. The high incidence of indirect interaction leads the authors to conclude that, although the majority of their respondents were travelling with family or friends, they still tended to remain in their own ‘bubble’ and limit their over interaction with others. Whether this is characteristic of (specific segments of) Chinese outbound tourists or a stage in the coming-of-age of Chinese outbound tourism is subject for future research.

*Designing and delivering co-created experiences*

The study by Buxton and Michopoulou addresses both the role of social interaction as well as the role of process customization in value co-creation. It focuses on a unresearched leisure setting, spas, because they are often considered destinations in themselves and they are also inextricably linked to the pursuit of health and wellbeing - one of the most prominent forms of wellness tourism. It offers a welcome in-depth theoretical analysis of value co-creation and co-destruction concepts including value, authenticity, emotions and memorability of experiences, before showing how these can be applied to complex servicescapes and sensory rich environments such as spas.

The fact that the design and delivery of co-created experiences entails several challenges is well shown in the article by Bezova and Azara. The first point that the authors wish to make is that value is co-created (rather than co-produced) when the customer is an active participant of the value creation process across all stages of the customer journey and that this process, for a series of reasons varying form the number of stakeholders involved to the lack of proper financing, may be particularly challenging for heritage sites. They probed this assumption by focusing on UK heritage sites and collecting insights from visitor experience managers. Findings suggest that, as in all co-creation processes, the characteristics, knowledge, and expectations of both parties highly determines the degree of co-creation that is possible. Interestingly, while respondents first point to a lack of engagement and demand from the customers, they also need to admit being better acquainted with the design and delivery of co-produced and customized experiences than co-created ones. One is therefore left wondering, whether the alleged visitors’ profile and demands are the cause or the effect of the traditional (more co-production than co-creation) way in which heritage’s sites shape their interaction with the customer. This article undoubtedly constitutes a good start for a much-needed reflection on the need to and practicalities of integrating co-created experiences in heritage site visits.

The paper by Michopoulou, Al-Qasmi, and Melpignano studies the role of desert tourists and camp managers in the process of value co-creation. It provides a comprehensive review of issues impacting co-creation as perceived by these two stakeholders, by connecting well-discussed concepts in the tourism literature such as place attachment and authenticity to the specific (and understudied) desert tourism context. Although the context and approach to this study is highly different from the UK study by Bezova and Azara, at least one of the conclusions is similar: the difficulty for service-providers on location (being guides on a heritage site or camp managers) to engage tourists in an effort of co-creation all along the customer’s journey. A second similarity between the two studies may be found in the limitations imposed by the knowledge of (one of the) parties on the possibilities for co-creation. In this case it is the camp managers gaze, their understanding of guests’ search for authenticity and their familiarity with social media that need to be challenged in order to come to a design and delivery process fully conducive to co-created experiences.

In conclusion, the examination of processes of value co-creation and co-destruction within tourism is now more pertinent than ever. Given the effects of constant sociocultural and environmental change and pandemic, and the huge challenges facing the sector, it is now more important than ever to understand what value is and how it can be created or destroyed. At the same time, findings presented in these papers point to the need of investigating additional factors that contribute to value co-creation in the context of tourism, but perhaps more importantly, factors that can result in value co-destruction. This issue continues the discussion on value co-creation and co-destruction, recognizing the variety of tourism servicescapes and experiences and emphasizing the necessity to examine tourism from beyond the narrow customer or provider angle; but rather focus on a wider spectrum of actors across value and distribution chains. This line of research is valuable therefore not just to expand this growing body of knowledge on a theoretical level; but to offer practitioners the critical insights required to rethink value within the design and delivery of their services, through the recovery stage and beyond.