Co-Creation through Technology:
Dimensions of Social Connectedness

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Abstract

With the increasing mobility and the emergence of social information and communication technologies, the tourist has turned into a connected consumer. In using the range of technologies available, tourists are now able to connect with their social circles to engage, share and co-create their tourist experiences online. While the significance of co-creation has been widely recognised, there is a major gap in understanding on what levels technology-facilitated co-creation can occur. This paper therefore aims to uncover the dimensions of social connectedness and develop a differentiated knowledge of how exactly tourists co-create through ICTs. The findings reveal six distinct dimensions that can be positioned on a social intensity continuum, ranging from disconnection to social co-living of the experience. In revealing social connectedness to everyday life and the home environment, this study highlights key implications for the existing theoretical understanding of tourist experience portrayed as a reversal from of the everyday life. Implications for further research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Connected consumer; ICTs; co-creation; social connectedness; everyday life;

1 Introduction

Co-creation has become an important notion in tourism research and practice. The tourist as an empowered consumer has been recognised as the central element in this process determining the creation of experiences and value. In particular, with information and communication technologies (ICTs) as pervasive tools accompanying the increasingly mobile tourist consumer anywhere and anytime (Green, 2002), the tourist can now co-create richer, personal and more meaningful experiences (Gretzel & Jamal, 2009; Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2008). As a result, with the proliferation of mobile devices and social media (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), the potential for technology supporting co-creation has reached a new extent. However, while much attention has been paid to understanding co-creation in the business context (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2008), little emphasis has been placed on understanding the social co-creation processes that occur outside of the company domain, when tourist consumers connect, engage and share with their social circles through technology. Despite acknowledging the high potential of technology for maximising social co-creation (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012), recent studies lack to provide a clear understanding of how exactly the contemporary connected consumer seeks to co-create tourist experiences. Given this two-fold gap in

knowledge, this study adopts a consumer-centric lens to explore technology-facilitated co-creation processes to identify dimensions of social connectedness. In developing these dimensions, this study contributes with differentiated knowledge of the extents to which consumers co-create through ICTs. To this end, the paper first discusses the theoretical foundations of consumer-centrism and co-creation theories as well as the impact of social and mobile ICTs on how the socially connected consumer co-creates. Second, the methodological approach by means of a qualitative in-depth enquiry is presented. Third, the findings are discussed revealing six social dimensions of social connectedness, which are graphically depicted in a new model. Finally, conclusions on the study's theoretical contributions are drawn, further research is suggested and practical implications for management are highlighted.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Consumer-centrism and Co-creation

With an evolution in society, characterised by consumers becoming more active, powerful and involved, there has been a transformation in services marketing in the way the traditional company-consumer power relationship is formed (Ramaswamy, 2009). The proliferation of ICTs has been one of the critical forces for the advancement of society and the growth of the empowered consumer. In facilitating access to information, transparency, processes and activities, ICTs have enforced an unprecedented shift in companies, consumers, employees, stakeholders and other consumers connecting and engaging with each other (Ramaswamy, 2009). By replacing the predominant goods- and service-dominant assumptions of the recent decades, co-creation has introduced new ways of *how* and *by whom* experiences and value are created. Central to this premise is that the consumer now is the main actor in both production and consumption (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

Subsequently, co-creation, defined as a dynamic, collective and collaborative process and a joint value creation between the company and the consumer (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) has thus introduced a new paradigm for experience creation. This advancement has been recognised in numerous emerging theoretical streams, including the notions of co-creation (Ramaswamy, 2009), co-production (Chathoth, Altinay, Harrington, Okumus, & Chan, 2013) or the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), which contribute to the current understanding of how contemporary experiences are created and constructed. More recently, scholars have introduced the customer-dominant logic as a new perspective recognising a shift from value creation in the business domain towards value creation within social experiences of the individual consumer (Heinonen, Strandvik, & Voima, 2013). This paradigm acknowledges C2C co-creation as a key source of value creation, as consumers create experiences with each other. In summarising these notions, Helkkula, Kelleher, and Pihlström (2012) state that co-creation can encompass a multitude and diversity of social dimensions in a range of social contexts. For instance, individuals can engage with businesses, consumer communities or personal networks alike to co-create socially intense and meaningful experiences (Arnould, Price, & Malshe, 2006).

2.2 Social and mobile ICTs

In recent years, ICTs have been one of the main forces driving consumer empowerment and enabling new multiple facets of co-creation (Neuhofer et al., 2012). In particular, the Internet and the subsequent advances of the Web 2.0 have induced one of the most critical technological and social developments over the past years (Fotis et al., 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This change has turned the Internet into an immense platform of interaction opening new levels of engagement and collaboration (Sigala, 2009). The plethora of interaction tools, including blogs, videos or social networking sites have encouraged individuals to participate, connect and engage and in turn co-create their experiences online (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2008). In addition to the rapid social technological developments, there has been a massive increase in mobility (Egger & Buhalis, 2008), which has not only shaped the physical movement of people, products and services but has caused a mobility of technology itself at the same time (Gretzel & Jamal, 2009). Due to their ubiquity, mobile devices allow tourists to connect, access and retrieve information on the move anywhere and anytime (Green, 2002; Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2012). This combination of social and mobile innovations in tourism has led to new ways of how tourists can potentially connect, interact and co-create with companies and each other.

2.3 The Socially Connected Tourist and Co-Creation

With the proliferation of ICTs, the potential for experiences to be co-created has 'exploded on an unprecedented scale everywhere in the value creation system' (Ramaswamy, 2009, p.17). This means that through ICTs, co-creation is no longer restricted to companies and consumers (B2C) but is enabled among consumers and social networks (C2C) on all levels. In fact, with consumers using ICTs to engage with their networks, there is evidence that co-creation increasingly takes place in the consumer domain (Grönroos, 2008). In this vein, recent literature confirms that the range of ICTs available can facilitate traditional co-creation in a number of different ways (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009; Wang et al., 2012). One of the possible applications of ICTs it to allow tourists to experience the physical tourist environment and stay connected in the online space at the same time. By being *interconnected* to social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, tourists can share, comment and co-create with friends, peers, tourism providers, and other consumers while being immersed in the tourism destination (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Tourists seek to *engage* with their social networks to support experiences (Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013) and *exchange* information, updates and opinions (Neuhofer et al., 2012) as well as *maintain social relations* and sharing experiences with each other (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). It is evident that the notion of ICTs supporting experience co-creation is widely discussed. However, while many recent studies have focused on B2C perspectives on how companies facilitate co-creation through ICTs in tourism destinations and hospitality settings (Neuhofer et al., 2012; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2013), there is a gap in understanding from a consumer perspective, on how exactly the connected tourist seeks to use social and mobile technologies to co-create the tourist experience. Moreover, while examples of co-creation have been mentioned in literature, a clear differentiation of the distinct dimensions in which technology-

facilitated co-creation can occur is missing. It is with this rationale in mind, that this study aims to address these gaps and uncover the underlying dimensions explaining how consumers use ICTs to connect and co-create their experiences when travelling.

3 Methodology

To address the aim of the study, a qualitative enquiry was adopted as a particularly useful method to capture the the subjective experiences that occurs within the individual human being (Larsen, 2007). For this purpose, qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews were selected as the most suitable method to cover predefined queries whilst maintaining the necessary flexibility for participants to narrate their experiences. The interview instrument was established based on the literature, refined through pilot-testing and continuously adapted through an iterative interview process to allow for emerging aspects to be incorporated. The sampling procedure followed a purposive sampling technique, as a common method in qualitative research when participants need to fulfil a set of prerequisites (Bryman, 2008). In order to collect rich accounts and descriptions of technology-facilitated co-creation, participants who have been involved in the required situation need to be sought (Robson, 1993). This means that highly technology-savvy users, as opposed to non-technology users, were critical for this research process. Accordingly, consumers meeting the following criteria had to be identified: a) technology-savvy consumers (owners of smart phones and daily use of smartphone and social media), b) prior experience of using ICTs for travel activities and c) the use of ICTs for travel within the last 12 months to ensure the recollection of their experiences. Due to the need to recruit individuals fulfilling all these requirements, the geographical location was secondary. Rather it was essential to find participants meeting the criteria, for which purpose locations with a potentially high concentration of technology-savvy users, such as a university environment, were used for participant recruitment. This process resulted in a total of 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews that were conducted in May 2013 in a seaside-town in the UK, with each interview lasting between 50 minutes and 2 hours and 20 minutes, with an average interview length of 1 hour and 24 minutes.

All interviews were voice-recorded and subsequently manually transcribed verbatim by the researcher in order to allow for a rigorous coding and analysis process (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Following Miles and Huberman (1994) principles of qualitative thematic analysis and guided by the research questions of the study, the data was coded through an exploratory multi-stage coding process, consisting of inductive brush coding of initial codes, coding-on, refining codes towards the development of the final themes and dimensions of the study. For this process, the computer software QSR NVivo 10 was used to transcribe, store, organise and manage the wealth of data. While in the qualitative enquiry, criteria, such as reliability and generalisability play a minor role (Creswell, 2003), it is critical to consider reflexivity, contextualisation, prolonged engagement, thick description, audit trail, member checks and triangulation (Holloway & Brown, 2012). By allowing for all these factors this study ensured to obtain thick descriptions and narratives, member checks with participants, as well as inter-coder reliability by independent coding validation of excerpts of the transcripts as well a transparent and rigorous research process through an audit trail

documenting the entire study (Patton, 2002). As this research was of qualitative nature, it does not seek to make claims of generalisability beyond the specific context to the wider population but rather seeks for theoretical generalisation of the concepts presented (Holloway & Brown, 2012). Table 1 below outlines the socio-demographic profile of the sample. While the sampling procedure was purposive based on inclusion criteria, participants were selected to represent a diverse mix and balance of gender, age groups, education levels and nationalities.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile sample

Nr.	Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	Education	Age	Smartphone
1	Laura	Female	Dutch	A-Levels	20	Samsung Galaxy
2	Jane	Female	German	MA	29	iPhone
3	Martha	Female	German	BA	24	iPod
4	Veronica	Female	Chinese	MSc	40	iPhone
5	Sam	Male	British	A-Levels	23	Samsung Galaxy
6	Paul	Male	British	MSc	62	iPhone
7	John	Male	Indonesian	MSc	34	Blackberry
8	Sandra	Female	Greek	MSc	27	HTC
9	Teresa	Female	Indonesian	BA	23	HTC
10	Andrew	Male	Pakistan	MSc	30	Samsung
11	Dan	Male	Greek	PhD	45	Blackberry
12	Aaron	Male	Italian	PhD	32	iPhone
13	Steve	Male	Belarus	PhD	32	Samsung Galaxy
14	Rachel	Female	German	MSc	24	Blackberry
15	Hanna	Female	Vietnamese	MSc	30	iPhone

4 Findings

The findings of the consumer-centric in-depth study reveal that co-creation through ICTs occurs on a number of distinct levels. This study contributes by developing six main dimensions of social connectedness, which can be depicted through two polar continuums ranging from high to low involvement and from solitary to socially connected. In positioning the findings on this two-fold continuum, the following six polar dimensions could be developed: 1) Social Connectedness vs. Social Disconnectedness, 2) Social Intercommunication vs. Social Interaction and 3) Social Co-Participation vs. Social Co-Living, which are portrayed in Figure 1 below. Next, all six dimensions are introduced, underpinned by quotes and discussed in detail.
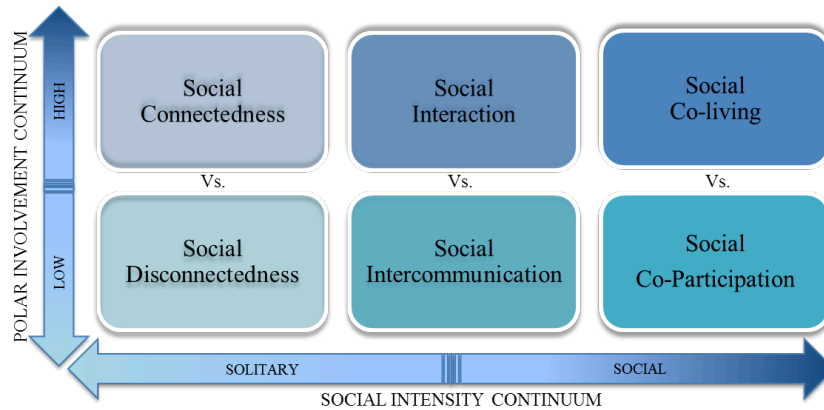
Fig. 1. Dimensions of Social Connectedness

1) Social Connectedness vs. Social Disconnectedness

Participants of the study report connectedness as a crucial part of their tourist experiences when being physically distant from home. Being connected through a variety of mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets, tourists seek to maintain a link to their everyday life and their mundane routines. While tourists want to fully immerse themselves into the experience at the destination, social connectedness with the home environment permits them to remain in contact with their social network not only for being updated, but also to avoid feeling spatially and temporarily isolated from their everyday lives. Many participants report the importance of being able to stay in touch with family, friends and also the work community:

> *"While travelling, call back the family and I also still use it as normal, like answer the email and update the work. Because in the past if you don't have the smart phone, you are stuck when you were travelling (...) So like this, when I travel in another country, I work and update like normal, and people don't feel like 'oh she is on holiday or she is on leave I have to wait another week to get the answer'." (Hanna)*

Social connectedness provides tourists a sense of attachment to home. Participants state that while they are physically away, mentally they have the feeling that they are still present there. Social connectedness demonstrates to be crucial for tourists to maintain and their social relationships and co-create their experiences. It seems to provide a sense of security and comfort, especially in situations when social relations on-site, e.g. with other tourists, are scarce. The possibility of connection with the own network, seems to partially replace the need for physical encounters with strangers, which indicates a shift of interactions to the familiar online social space.

> *"If you don't and can't interact with the people around you, because you might not know them, then it is nice to have a conversation or have this kind of sense that other people are still around you, even though it is kind of virtual, it gives you kind of a security, and then you are more willing to share the experience." (Rachel)*

In contrast to the desire for consistent social connectedness and the blurring of everyday life and the tourist experience through ICTs, the findings also indicate a polar view, suggesting an equal need for tourists' disconnectedness. Participants emphasise that the state of being connected to and co-creating with the social network often represents an inhibitor of switching off, preventing escapism from home and enjoying the 'real experience'. Due to the convergence of everyday life with travel, participants report an interference of their travel experience:

> *"Because if I connect so much it is not kind of travelling anymore, you are, I don't know, I just really like I want to get off the daily life, so I seek the reality, because if you stick so much with technology you don't really enjoy the place you live." (Hanna)*
> *"I think that somebody who uses technology that much to that extent, cannot actually enjoy that places that much, because you are so caught up in sharing it with other people rather than enjoying it yourself that much." (Rachel)*

The findings suggest that ICTs can be key tools in that they enable tourists to maintain social connections and allow for co-creation processes to occur. In contrast, while tourists desire connecting with everyday life, the polar view suggests the need for escapism from home, living the 'real experience' and maintaining co-creation with individuals, such as tourists or tourism providers, in the physical surroundings.

2) Social Intercommunication vs. Social Interaction

In case social connectedness with the online network is established, the findings suggest a further differentiation of two co-creation processes. Depending on the intensity of the encounter, there appears to be a continuum from social intercommunication and to social interaction. While terminologically often coined as interaction, participants point out that social media facilitated interactions frequently lack a deeper dialogue. With co-creation aiming at creating interactions that are meaningful to the individual, interactions through social networking seem to lack in depth. One participant exemplifies this frequently mentioned perception.

> *"The deep a dialogue can be is 'are you in London, amazing, have you been there' 'no I'm not going there' 'ok fine go there next time' because the rest can be, 'I like it, wow, fantastic, where are you'. I mean the question is, is that real interaction? (...) A collection of feedback and there is no possibility of creating a third meaning. And when I post pictures of things when I share things about my travel experience the best comment I have "very nice" but we are not creating a meaning." (Aaron)*

The question therefore is what makes a technology-facilitated interaction and experience co-creation processes meaningful. While there is a two-way interaction stream of one person uploading and sharing a picture that triggers the response of another person to reply (e.g. through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), participants state that this does not account for a full interaction or replace meaningful exchanges and dialogues as they occur in the real environment. Accordingly, there is need to draw a line between two forms of social encounters, namely *social intercommunication*, as a brief and light form of contact and messaging and *social interaction*, as a much deeper form of dialogue in which two parties exchange and create a meaning. *"I think*

interaction should create a meaning, I have a position, you have a position and we discuss about it and then there is a third position coming up which is blended." (Aaron)

On the other end of the continuum, social interactions are often manifested as a prolonged dialogue that has been triggered by an experience shared for online. One participant reports for instance reports that sharing pictures has led to meaningful discussions on a mutual subject which added socially constructed value to the actual physical tourist experience.

> *"It is slightly overall experience changing just because I can share it a little bit and then we just talk about it to say, my friend "oh I can't believe you had that" "yes" and "I have been to your house and it was nothing like that" or something like that". (Sam)*

In summary, technology-facilitated social interactions can occur to different extents. While technology allows for an ease of communication, it partially occurs on a superficial level with short messages or comments being exchanged. To render co-creation more engaging, there is need for deeper interactions online that allow for proper discussions, outcomes and meanings to be exchanged.

3) Social Co-Participation vs. Social Co-Living

In increasing the intensity of co-creating tourist experiences, the findings indicate that technology allows tourist consumers to not only connect and interact but allows for immersive form of co-creation in which the network can become part of the experience itself. To reflect this new phenomenon which has not been recognised in the literature so far, the new terms social co-participation and social co-living have been coined. These reflect the new process of co-creation through technology, in which the individuals in the connected social network become virtual co-participants of the tourist's lived tourist experience. One participants describes the notion of intense co-creation through social participation, as a sensation of others '*being there with you'* during travels. Sharing is a central premise to the social experience, and by sharing the own experience, technology is a key facilitator for other people to participate in the experience at the very moment of its occurrence. While traditionally experiences were primarily shared post-travel upon the return home, technology allows people to co-create and become virtual travel companions of the experience in real time. One participant reports:

> *"Just the feeling to have the other people participating in your journey even though they are not there but to share your experience with them because you can't share it with no one else because no one else is there. I mean you can make friends on your journey but then you share it with your virtual friends instead of sharing it with a person who is not there". (Jane)*

Additionally, participants highlight the example of people from the social network who socially co-construct the experience online.

> *"Yes I just want to make sure they find those really nice places, that they might have not gone to because that might have not been their choice of things to do." (Rachel)*
> *"I don't even consider to try that food during my planning, and because my friend told*

me that I have to try this food or this drink, it inspires you 'ok maybe I can try things that they recommend me' so it gives me information, so it is two ways." (Teresa)

Moreover, in allowing the social network to become real participants of the experience, the online shared experience can become real to an extent that people are not only participating but essentially co-living the travel moment. This notion can be defined as 'co-living', allowing connected people to live the experience through the tourist's eyes:

> *"Some others just travel through my eyes, so they have never had the chance to go to. It is tele-presence, it is like going to the movies and watch a film about Bollywood and you feel that you are in India". (Dan)*

In summary, the findings indicate that co-creation through ICTs can be taken to a socially intense level that makes it possible to virtually co-live the tourist experience. When sharing experiences, the connected tourist can allow people to communicate, interact, participate, re-construct experiences as well as lend people virtual eyes to co-live tourist moments from the distance in the home environment.

5   Discussion

This study aimed to explore co-creation processes through technology from a consumer perspective to identify dimensions of social connectedness. Beyond recognising the potential of co-creation, this study makes a contribution in that it empirically explored and uncovered a distinctiveness of technology-facilitated social co-creation processes taking place. It has revealed six overall dimensions of social connectedness. Figure 1 above demonstrates that these dimensions, varying in intensity, can be placed on a vertical polar continuum in terms of low and high involvement, and on a horizontal continuum ranging from solitary disconnectedness to a highly connected and socially intense state. Building on the principles of co-creation, this study provided a consumer-centric lens of co-creation in a technology-facilitated context. In revealing these distinct dimensions, this paper makes a theoretical contribution to the existing co-creation discourse in a number of ways. While the existing literature has argued that ICTs facilitates co-creation (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2008), this study contributes by revealing that co-creation is *not a single process* but can occur on *multiple levels and intensities*. In that it proposes six distinct dimensions of social connectedness, this study also contributes in putting forward new knowledge suggesting that it is not sufficient to use the popular term co-creation *per se*, but rather recognise its nuances and understand the different ways in which tourist co-create through technology. In that it looks at co-creation processes from an inherently consumer-centric perspective, this study goes beyond B2C co-creation, and reveals how tourists co-create within their own social circles.

In line with recent work (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009; Wang et al., 2012; Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2013) this study has confirmed that ICTs can constitute a key instrument to facilitate richer and more socially intense experiences. Particularly mobile technologies benefit tourists to be constantly connected and co-create

experiences and value with multiple individuals. As more social and mobile ICTs are at the disposal of the contemporary consumer, social connectedness can be potentially facilitated as the tourist connects, communicates, interacts, co-participates and co-lives experiences together with the social network online. Through co-creation with the social network, technologies support tourist consumers not only in the physical destination (Neuhofer et al., 2012), but allow them to stay connected and in touch with their everyday environment at the same time. These findings suggest a major contradiction to the long tradition in tourism literature suggesting the escapism from the routines of everyday life as one of the key motivational triggers for travel (Cohen, 1979). While literature substantiates a clear boundary between travel and the everyday life, this study suggests that these boundaries dissolve, as tourists increasingly connect and co-create with their network and home environment online.

6 Conclusions and Implications

The power of the Web 2.0 and the increasing mobility of technologies have led to the emergence of a connected social and mobile consumer who is able to co-create tourist experience to a new extent. In addressing the gaps in the existing literature, this study had the aim to explore technology-facilitated co-creation and develop a differentiated understanding of co-creation processes by identifying six distinct dimensions of social connectedness. While human social encounters with other tourists or tourism providers remain a significant part of the overall social dimension of the tourist experience, this study highlights that technology can potentially add further social dimensions of co-creation through the connection to the social network online. In this vein, it is not the technological tools per se but rather the social connection to people online that render the experience more social. In that the findings indicate a connection to the everyday life, this study has major implications on the existing theoretical assumptions portraying the tourist experience as an escapism from and reversal of the everyday life (Cohen, 1979). In contrast to the existing the understanding, this study highlights that tourists use technology primarily as a means to connect with the everyday life for multiple purposes, as to stay up-to-date, not losing touch with people, maintain social relations and share while undergoing tourist experiences on-site. The key question is thus whether technology is a potential catalyst of change breaking down the hitherto clear boundaries tourism and everyday life. In addition to the potential of technology for social connectedness, the study highlights that there is also a contrasting movement towards disconnectedness from the social network online. In this vein, technology is perceived as a diminishing factor in the overall tourist experience when it is considered to be too immersive or distracting and detaches the tourist from the real physical surroundings.

This study makes a number of critical contributions to tourism theory and practice. On theoretical grounds, this study contributes to the recent studies exploring mobile technologies for experiences (Wang et al., 2013) and the value of technology facilitated co-creation (Neuhofer et al., 2012), by empirically exploring social dimensions of co-creation through technology. This study adds knowledge by providing dimensions of social connectedness which can be used as a basis for further research in the C2C co-creation as well as technology domain. In acknowledging the

limitations of this study in terms of a qualitative and hence small sample size, the need for further research of both qualitative and quantitative nature is suggested. For instance, studies could build on the findings by analysing and breaking down the social network of friends, peers, family and companies to understand their specific roles and potential differences in co-creation processes of the tourist experiences. A further aspect worth exploring is the notion of experience co-living from the view of those 'being at home' to understand the effect of socially shared experiences on them for inspiration, decision-making and travel planning alike. Moreover, the idea of constant social connectedness in contrast to the notion of escapism from everyday life is a critical notion worth exploring in future studies. To complement qualitative enquiries, quantitative studies are needed to test the presented findings on a larger scale by looking for possible effects of socially intense co-creation on value extraction or satisfaction. For the industry and management context, this study suggests a number of practical implications. While experience co-creation practices are realised throughout a number of industries, co-creation (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009), and especially technology-facilitated co-creation (Chathoth et al., 2013) are still limited in tourism. Therefore, this study suggests exploring the potential of technology as a key tool to facilitate more opportunities for social co-creation experiences for the tourist consumer. Thereby, it is of particular importance to support consumers to co-create experiences outside the company domain with each other (C2C). This means that first and foremost the technological requirements need to be fulfilled that allow the tourist to be connected, for instance, through wireless access in hotel rooms, at airports and wireless destinations. If successfully facilitated, important implications for businesses can unfold, as consumers can more effectively connect on the move and co-create an enhanced experience and value, not only with the own network but also with the tourism provider online.

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