

Research Space
Journal article

Destination branding and co-creation: a service ecosystem perspective

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Destination branding and co-creation: a service ecosystem perspective

Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on the service-dominant logic and the institutional theory, the paper aims to explore the value-creating mechanisms of branding in the destination context and the brand co-creation process at and between different levels of a service ecosystem.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory research design was utilised to generate qualitative data from 18 in-depth interviews with important stakeholders and investigate how and why brand co-creation is fostered in the service ecosystem.

Findings – The study proposes a stepwise process of strategic imperatives for brand co-creation in the destination context. It presents the multidirectional flows of the brand meaning across levels of the tourism ecosystem and thereby interprets stakeholders' efforts to co-create sustainable brands that gain prominence in the global tourism arena.

Research limitations/implications – Future research might validate the framework in a quantitative research setting. The extended analysis of the value-creating ecosystem could investigate the role of institutions and brand value propositions across levels.

Practical implications – Acknowledging their limited control over the brand co-creation process, tourism practitioners are offered step-by-step guidance to help shape a destination brand that may retain relevance in the tourists' minds. Critical insights are provided into resource sharing between actors and subsequent responsibilities for a sustainable destination branding strategy.

Originality/value – The paper considers the significance of the various levels in the ecosystem and the underlying mechanisms of brand co-creation in a somewhat neglected branding domain.

Keywords: brand co-creation, value co-creation, service ecosystem, destination branding, tourism, DMOs, qualitative research

Article Type: Research Paper

Introduction

Global tourism competition poses challenges for destinations, including efforts to access to ideas, finance, talent, and visitors. Destinations compete against each other for a share of income, talent, and voice, and are determined by the power of the overall country image (Elliot *et al.*, 2011) and the competency of the destination brand. The need for differentiation is increasing in an era of reduced barriers, in terms of investment, information generation and dissemination, travel accessibility, and means of transport. Unless a destination is distinctive, with effective positioning and a strong destination image (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2013; Styliadis and Cherifi, 2018), it is highly unlikely that the destination will successfully compete to attract global attention.

Like traditional brands, destinations have individual identities, which are distinct as no two destinations are alike (Jaworski and Fosher, 2003). Based on their unique identities, many destinations have been branding themselves cautiously and consistently. Yet, destinations constitute a more complex field for the application of brand management. As places of life, visitation, and change, destinations can lack the stability most traditional brands enjoy (Almeyda-Ibáñez and Babu, 2017). The inherent complexity of destination branding is probably the reason why research on this topic remains restricted from a place management perspective (e.g. García *et al.*, 2012; Foroudi *et al.*, 2016).

On the grounds that strong brands entail consumer involvement (Coupland *et al.*, 2005; Boyle, 2007; Ind *et al.*, 2013; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2016; Black and Veloutsou, 2017), tourists, hospitality firms, and destination management authorities share resources in collaboration, co-operation, and a co-creation process (Baumgarth, 2018) generating experiential products (Buhalis and Foerste, 2015; Rihova, *et al.*, 2018). The literature in brand co-creation has mainly focused on the demand side (Kristal *et al.*, 2016; Füller and Bilgram,

2017; Kennedy, 2017; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2017; Lee and Soon, 2017; Donner and Fort, 2018; France *et al.*, 2020), while the supply side has only been examined in the form of case study research in the luxury sector (Hughes *et al.*, 2016) and the business to business (B2B) setting (Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018). Thus, there is a need to provide a balanced review of the brand co-creation concept in a structured ecosystem setting (Chandler and Vargo, 2011).

Studies have posited the role of technology as the main platform for co-creation (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016; Hernández *et al.*, 2016; Kennedy, 2017; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2017; Lee and Soon, 2017). Yet, the concept of brand co-creation is rarely discussed (Merrilees, 2016). The conversation about how and why this occurs (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2013) is long overdue as the relevant literature presents only a limited number of qualitative studies (Lee and Soon, 2017; Donner and Fort, 2018). Conceptualising the branding process beyond the technological setting, the storytelling (Sarkar and Banerjee, 2019) or storygiving (Hughes *et al.*, 2016), this study delves into the very essence of the value-creating mechanisms of branding in the destination context.

The study adopts an exploratory approach, as a foundation for a thorough understanding of the branding process in a value-creating ecosystem (Giannopoulos *et al.*, 2020). Following the identification of the emerging roles in the ecosystem (Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018), the study goes further to empirically delineate the structure of the ecosystem that engenders the multidirectional forces in brand co-creation (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017). It thereby addresses the research questions of how and why in brand development and maintenance over time in the destination context.

Contributing to the branding literature, the paper aims to interpret and support potential actors' efforts in a value-creating ecosystem to develop powerful destination brands that attract global attention and preference. Given the complicated nature of destinations (Pike, 2015), only a limited number of studies have addressed the combined destination branding

perceptions and activities on behalf of various stakeholders (Wang, 2019). A greater understanding of these factors may help to develop and support sustainable destination branding over time. This study therefore utilises a co-creation perspective within the destination context, incorporating the multiple interactions that take place within the value-creating ecosystem (Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018). Additionally, the extant literature presents a very limited number of frameworks for branding and may be characterised by shortcomings. These shortcomings include a focus on tactical rather than strategic guidelines for successful destination branding (Balakrishnan, 2009). There is also emphasis on how branding is linked to concepts such as place image and reputation, without offering specific branding imperatives in the destination setting (Foroudi *et al.*, 2016).

This work synthesises the existing knowledge relating to the integration of brand management and co-creation (Buhalis and Inversini, 2014), providing a foundation for the systematic development of the branding concept in the tourism context. The study proposes a branding framework that considers not only the branding literature and its application in the tourism sector but also the nested structure of key actors in the industry (i.e. empirical research based on multiple sources) viewed as an ecosystem (Giannopoulos *et al.*, 2020). The study establishes the building blocks and develops a comprehensive destination branding framework for policy-makers (e.g. governmental authorities, destination management organizations/DMOs etc.) and other stakeholders to build upon (e.g. hotels, restaurants, transportation companies, travel agents, tourists and local residents etc.). The proposed hierarchical approach of the ecosystem unveils the significance of interconnections (nested levels) and explores how these interconnections are developed (at which level and to what extent). This understanding will deliver brand value for all parties in brand group settings (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017), such as tourism organisations, hospitality firms, and locals. It

is acknowledged that actors exert some influence on their counterparts and are influenced by others, mostly depending on their position in the ecosystem (levels).

To accomplish this purpose, the study has drawn on the relevant literature that either explicitly delves into brand co-creation or implicitly contributes to a deeper understanding of the concept. The research involved in-depth interviews with key-informants from the tourism industry to incorporate feedback and translate this feedback into novel insights regarding the principal dimensions of a branding strategy in a tourism setting. These dimensions emerged from the qualitative findings and led to the conceptualisation of a coherent destination branding framework. The paper then offers a discussion of the implications for practitioners in the sector, as well as thoughts for future research in the field. The proposed framework explores those involved (the who) and the relevance for the hearts and minds of tourists, locals, employees, tourism companies and other organisations (the how), by highlighting an organic view of branding (Iglesias *et al.*, 2013) in a destination context (i.e. brand co-creation occurs within the ecosystem beyond DMO's total control).

Literature Review

Branding principles and tourism destinations

Contrary to the proliferation of studies in the field of product branding, research into place and destination branding is still emerging (Civelek, 2015; Oliveira and Panyik, 2015; Almeyda-Ibáñez and Babu, 2017; Tran *et al.*, 2019). There are also questions whether the embedded principles of branding can be transferred to the destination context and strengthen the theoretical foundations of place branding (Pedeliento and Kavaratzis, 2019). Since the early 2000s, academics and practitioners appear to agree that destinations can be branded and promoted in a similar way to consumer goods and services (e.g. Olins, 2002; Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Anholt, 2002; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002; Wang *et al.*, 2020). As a

result, destination branding has increasingly attracted interest as a research topic, leaving behind earlier scepticism as to how the brand concept can be adopted within the destination context (e.g. Curtis, 2001; Cai, 2002; Caldwell and Freire, 2004). In this line, it also affects the researcher brand equity index in hospitality and tourism (Köseoglu *et al.*, 2019).

Previous research in destination marketing has been characterised by knowledge-intensity and considered particularly complicated (Singh and Hu, 2008). This complexity may be considered fundamental when attempting to capture the essence of a destination due to its multi-attributed nature (Pike, 2005). A myriad of interactions take place in different places; the way these interactions unfold is a constituent part of the destination product, which is actually lived, experienced, and shared. Hence, its competitiveness lies with the coordination of all parties (i.e. public and private sector, tourists, and residents) to balance of the interests of stakeholder satisfaction and the sustainability of local resources.

Destination branding

Although the first scholarly works on destination branding appeared in late 1990s (Pitchard and Morgan, 1998), the use of marketing strategies at a national level was first mentioned more than 40 years ago by Kotler and Levy (1969, p. 11), who suggested that “*nations also resort to international marketing campaigns to get across important points about themselves to the citizens of other countries*”. Morgan and Pitchard (2000) highlighted the importance of destination branding, postulating that the battle for tourists will be no longer fought over price but over customers’ hearts and minds, also supporting that branding will act as a key success factor.

In general, early destination branding studies were based on a G-D (goods-dominant) logic and were output-oriented (Saraniemi and Kylänen, 2011). Literature on destination branding emphasises the delivery of the brand reality to visitors instead of the co-creation of a brand experience with them. Consequently, destination branding is seen as a product-oriented

activity. For example, and in accordance with the G-D logic, destination branding is defined as:

... the set of marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word, mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk (Blain et al., 2005, pp. 337).

This suggests destination branding is the creation of an image that influences consumers' decisions to visit the destination in question, as opposed to an alternative destination.

Following the rationale that implies there is a clear distinction between goods and services (i.e. remnants of G-D logic), research on destination branding has focused on brand equity (e.g. Boo et al., 2009; Horng et al., 2012; Bianchi et al., 2014; Gartner, 2014; Tasci, 2018). Literature has adopted constructs from the psychology and the brand literature such as brand love (Coelho et al., 2019). It has been extended to the brand destination context (Aro et al., 2018), as brand personality (Usakli and Baloglu, 2011; Chen and Phou, 2013; Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019), brand authenticity (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020), destination trust (Su et al., 2020), and destination attachment, loyalty and image (e.g. Qu et al., 2011; Veasna et al., 2013; Lv et al., 2020).

However, branding has been used by tourism destinations to clarify the promise and specify the different experiences that tourists can expect when visiting a destination (Almeyda-Ibáñez and Babu, 2017). Residents' perception of their place as a tourism destination may also contribute to a better understanding of place image versus destination image (Stylidis, 2020). Thus, destinations are embedded with specific brand values (e.g. Vargo and Lusch 2018) and communicate their credibility as tourism destinations by means

of branding, thereby encouraging value-congruity (Kumar and Nayak, 2019). Apart from research dealing with terms and notions in the destination branding literature (Kladou *et al.*, 2015), important input in this study stems from seminal work in the branding field. Although there is no direct reference to the tourism context, the research focus of brand building in these studies (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Davis *et al.*, 2003; Keller, 2008) rests on the development and maintenance of strong brands.

Destination branding and co-creation

Most of the tourism destination studies to date have explored the brand concept primarily from a demand-side perspective, adopting a consumer-perceived-image approach (e.g. Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Anholt, 2004; Trembath *et al.*, 2011; Hultman *et al.*, 2017; Chang *et al.*, 2020). Fewer studies have adopted a supply-side managerial perspective (e.g. Cai, 2002; Hankinson, 2007; Blain *et al.*, 2005; Balakrishnan, 2009). Yet, later research incorporated the value created from different stakeholders from both the demand and the supply-side (Saraniemi, 2010).

Although the topic of brand co-creation in the literature dates back almost 15 years (Iglesias *et al.*, 2013; Guzmán *et al.*, 2018), only recently has the literature shown that destination brands can be considered products that are co-created (e.g. Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Oliveira and Panyik, 2015). Other tourism studies denote the importance of applying the S-D (service-dominant) logic in the hotel (FitzPatrick *et al.*, 2013) and agritourism context (Rong-Da Liang, 2017). Recent research has focused on concepts such as place attachment (Suntikul and Jachna, 2016), identity and culture (Lugosi, 2014), while the dark side of co-creation has begun to attract some attention (Dolan *et al.*, 2019; Järvi *et al.*, 2020).

Commonly used output frameworks of destination branding are founded on similar conceptualisations. For example, Balakrishnan (2009) offered governing bodies a practical framework when investing time, money, and effort to create a global destination. The research

applied stakeholder management but emphasised the targeting of tourists, differentiating positioning (Ind *et al.*, 2017) and several tangible and intangible interrelated components such as logos, smell, and taste. Saraniemi (2010) also analysed the value created by stakeholders for the development of destination brand identity. García *et al.* (2012) built on the notion of destination image and destination brand to suggest a destination branding framework that takes into consideration the interests of different stakeholders. Importantly, some frameworks incorporate the rationale of value created throughout the destination experience. For example, a destination brand can be defined as the sum of all narratives and destination experiences where tourists/travellers have access to ICT and act as co-creators of destination brands (Oliveira and Panyik, 2015). Following this line of reasoning, co-creators of destination brands may be considered various actors with multiple interactions (i.e. different stakeholders in the tourism industry).

Destination branding and actor-to-actor perspective

Research has also examined how destination branding affects relevant actors (Zenker *et al.*, 2017) and how consumer perceptions about tourism destinations can affect the national tourism brand (de Oliveira Santos and Giraldi, 2017). This study takes this further and views tourism and hospitality stakeholders as actors (e.g. tourism businesses, tourists, households, etc.) by adopting an actor-to-actor (A2A) perspective (Vargo and Lusch, 2018). Stakeholder interaction is also considered an integral part of broader ecosystem of encounters, activities, and collaborations, at and between different levels (i.e. national, local, regional). An A2A view of destination branding predisposes that different entities (e.g. travellers, trip planners, residents) integrate their resources to co-create destination branding (Vargo and Lusch, 2018). In accordance with the resource-advantage (R-A) theory (Hunt and Morgan, 1997), actors are viewed as the collaborators of heterogeneous and imperfectly mobile resources (Hunt, 2000). These resources are considered tangible and intangible entities (Hunt, 2004), for example,

ideas, brand knowledge, brand creativity, market intelligence, available to different actors that enable them to co-create appropriate value propositions related to the destination.

The principal stakeholders of the tourism ecosystem can be perceived as a network of actors in various contexts. The ecosystem of services related to the destination has multiple nested levels of context, namely, the micro, meso, and macro level that frame service exchange and value co-creation (Chandler and Vargo, 2011). For instance, the micro-level may include tourist-resident interactions or interactions between tourists (Rihova *et al.*, 2018). The meso-level shifts the focus to multiple firms representing various tourism outputs such as accommodation, restaurants and catering, conferences and events, transportation, and travel intermediaries. The macro-level refers to the orchestration of all the complex relationships between destinations, governmental authorities, travellers, tourism firms, and other entities. This level focuses on the DMOs, as organisations guided by a set of rules, concerned with the coordination and efficient distribution of tourism services. Hence, the network of actors at destination level can be seen at various levels of aggregation.

As actor engagement can be seen as a micro-foundation for value co-creation (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016), understanding the various levels of aggregation where co-creation takes place reveals a wider picture of destination branding co-creation (Vargo and Lush, 2017). It also adds to a deeper understanding of actors and the way their actions and interactions unfold and how they influence the co-creation of destination branding at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

Destination branding and institutional theory

The complexity of the tourism destination concept derives from its multiple attributes. Countless different products, services, and experiences are all administered, offered, and consumed from distinct entities (hotel owners, travel agents, tour operators, transportation companies, local authorities and residents, DMOs, tourists etc.). These stakeholder groups

often have different ownership forms and might lack an adequate hierarchy or operational guidelines or rules (e.g., Donner and Fort, 2018; Konecnik and Go, 2008).

Destinations like other service ecosystems need shared institutions (that provide a framework and rules) to coordinate activities among actors and function effectively (Vargo *et al.*, 2015). Institutions can be described as human-invented constraints, conventions, and permissions, such as rules, norms, meanings, symbols, practices, and aides for collaboration (Vargo and Lusch, 2018), that influence and guide actor's behaviour, enabling or constraining the actors' actions (Scott, 2008; Vargo *et al.*, 2015) and interactions (i.e. resource integration and service-for-service exchange) (Akaka *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, they offer a structure for value co-creation and resource integration in service ecosystems (Akaka and *et al.*, 2013; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2017). Institutions may be of a regulative (formal rules that affect actors' behaviour), normative (norms, values, beliefs), or cognitive (perception and representation of actor's reality) nature (Scott, 2008). Previous work combined institutional theory with country image in a country-of-origin context (Lin *et al.*, 2019). In the destination context, for example, the facilitating role of the DMO for all actors involved might be considered a norm, but the adoption of the brand and its visual aspects (e.g. logos etc.) in all the official destination marketing campaigns should be considered a rule.

Since institutions exert impact on resource integration and value assessment by the beneficiary (Vargo and Lusch, 2018), this study views institutions as either enabling or constraining the destination branding experience. Institutions also guide how actors assess or evaluate the destination brand co-creation. Drawing on this conceptualisation, the notion of destination branding is filtered through the lens of institutional theory (Scott, 2008). Thus, this work approaches destination branding as a dynamic process of co-creating a brand for a destination shaped by different actors' and institutions within the ecosystem of services related to the destination.

For this reason, this study argues that the institutions, institutional logic, and the regulative, normative, and cognitive functions either enable or constrain destination brand co-creation. Consider for example the complicated legislative framework for tourism policy and the high level of bureaucracy at governmental level, which may hinder essential interactions between the official national tourism organisation and the actors involved in the destination branding process. This suggests the brand is not co-created but seems to be delivered to the parties that are lower in the hierarchy. However, flexible forms of cooperation (i.e. public-private-partnerships) might enable the development of commonly agreed strategies for destination branding. As suggested by Akaka *et al.*, (2013) congruence or difference between actors' shared institutions guide the success of the interaction. Considering the role of institutions, it can be perceived that congruence or conflict may encourage or limit the level of destination brand co-creation. It is not by chance that some slogans are frequently recalled as emblems of the destination e.g. "I love NY", "I amsterdam".

Destination branding in the ecosystem of tourism

Although places have to compete intensely for tourists, foreign direct investments, and exports (Balakrishnan, 2009) to link culture, identity, and image (Pedeliento and Kavaratzis, 2019), the literature is missing a solid branding framework to support the efforts of tourism stakeholders to build and maintain powerful destination brands that stand out in the global tourism market. An ecosystem view provides a deeper and wider perspective of destination branding within the extant literature. More specifically, it enables and compels researchers to zoom out (Leroy *et al.*, 2013) beyond dyadic exchange encounters (micro level) and to regard value as being created in ecosystems of service-for-service exchange (Alexander *et al.*, 2018). As Chandler and Vargo (2011) noted, it is essential to zoom both in and out to understand phenomena at any level of interest. Therefore, no activity can be fully understood, unless

other levels are identified to provide a broader view and the principal role of institutions facilitates destination brand development.

Previous studies examined value co-creation either at the micro level (Griseemann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Buonincontri *et al.*, 2017; Lin *et al.*, 2017; Prebensen and Xie, 2017; González-Mansilla *et al.*, 2019) or by combining micro, meso, and macro levels altogether (Hsiao *et al.*, 2015; Altinay *et al.*, 2016). Although the experiential nature of co-creation (e.g. Campos *et al.*, 2017; McLeay *et al.*, 2019) has gained ground in the academic literature, the destination component, which frames the service ecosystem is still largely neglected. Especially where the focus aims to delineate the main pillars of a destination brand co-creation strategy. Indeed, a close examination of the extant research stream on tourism and S-D logic reveals a lack of clear definition of a successful destination brand strategy process, very little attention to management issues, as well as, little or no empirically tested theory. Extending the relevant literature on destination branding through the lens of the S-D logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2018), this paper attempts to develop a framework that moves away from the value that tourists might attribute to the destination brand. The proposed framework incorporates the value co-created from the different stakeholders and all the interactions in this complex ecosystem, following a multi-stakeholder perspective on perceived value (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2013; Donner and Fort, 2018).

Thus, it would be deemed important if an exploratory work was developed in this field and a specially designed qualitative research was undertaken in order to further contribute to the theoretical development of a comprehensible destination branding framework under the service ecosystem perspective.

Methodology

Data collection

Given the complexity stemming from the multiple interactions within the tourism ecosystem and to illuminate the dynamics developed to build a destination brand, data were collected from three different actors (i.e. regional DMO, hotels and restaurants) operating in the Aegean Islands, Greece (Dodecanese and Cyclades islands). The exploratory research was designed to generate qualitative data and investigate how and why brand co-creation plays a role in the destination context (ecosystem). For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key-representatives from the Aegean Islands, on the grounds that they engage with other actors within the ecosystem on a regular basis. To gain a wide range of views and perspectives, efforts were made to ensure that the sample included key-representatives, with five informants being responsible for destination branding strategies (policy-makers) as DMO representatives from the Region of South Aegean making up the Directorate of Tourism responsible for the tourism development strategy.

Also, thirteen Hotel and Restaurant managers were selected to participate based on their local knowledge and expertise. In more detail, the research team engaged in research collaboration with large five-star hotels and high-quality restaurants to interview one key informant per unit, all located in Rhodes, Kos, Mykonos, and Santorini. The selected respondents were also members of local restaurant and hotel managers associations that seek to identify and tackle destination-marketing issues. Considered as critical informants, the respondents with a closer relationship to regional bodies (authorities and associations) experience interactions that play a crucial role in shaping branding activities at the destination. Also, hotel and restaurant firms constitute crucial parts of the travel and tourism community (i.e. network of actors), in the private tourism sector. They are perceived as being principal stakeholders in tourism (i.e. actors) with a broader view of the tourism ecosystem and destination brand-related policies. As part of the industry, single service providers (e.g. hotels, restaurants etc.) may appear as entities at the meso-level, stimulating tourism

experiences at the micro-level, also affecting destination brand reputation and image (Inversini, 2020) at the macro-level.

Personal interviews were scheduled in the summer of 2018. Typically, interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and were audio taped and transcribed verbatim, yielding a total of 320 pages. The post hoc method of data saturation during the sampling procedure was used, implying that, when the same issues emerged from the interviews, a sufficient sample size had been reached (Lee *et al.*, 1999). Careful consideration of the data corroborated that theoretical saturation (Creswell, 2013) was achieved at 18 personal interviews, which signalled the completion of this stage of the research process.

Data were collected from documentary evidence (business plans, statistics, tourism policy papers, websites, social media posts, and press clippings), which increased the level of information available to strengthen the empirical study. In line with Yin's (2018) suggestions, three researchers were involved in the process of data collection from different sources to ensure convergent, triangulated evidence that provides support to the findings and contribute to validity and reliability. A database was then created, including all the collected data and the field notes of the research team to briefly outline the nature and the content of the empirical evidence, before proceeding with the data analysis.

To provide a synthesis of the research setting and rationale, Table 1 outlines the profile of the respondents based on their position and the corresponding entity (i.e. actor) they represent within the ecosystem.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1: Profile of the respondents

The data collection approach aimed to examine how current practices evolve and how actors adopt them (Garud *et al.* 2007). In-depth interviews were conducted based on an

interview guide (Bryman, 2001; Cabidu *et al.*, 2013) that ensured consistency between interviews, and increased the reliability of the findings. Questions addressed the context of destination branding and discussion probed the respondents to share their perspectives on what they do, who they collaborate with, and why. Additional general questions inquired about the respondent's roles, the role of tourists, and the interrelationships with other stakeholders involved in coordination of the destination branding process. It was hoped these answers would trace the structural links within the ecosystem. The respondents were asked to freely express their views on destination branding, its importance at regional/country level, and mention any specific activities a brand-oriented destination should undertake and, generally, anything perceived as being critical for a destination to build a successful brand. These questions were all included in the interview guide (see Appendix A), which was pilot tested with two hotel managers of large well-established hotels in Greece (Yin, 2008).

Data analysis

Respondents' insights were incorporated into the existing knowledge of destination branding to further clarify an appropriate strategy for building powerful destination brands. To achieve this, each researcher read every interview transcript many times. Afterwards, to reveal the interpretations of co-creation in the destination branding process within the tourism ecosystem, all researchers developed brief summaries. These summaries aimed to capture the essence of the information, accumulate knowledge, and provide an initial understanding of the outcomes coupled with the theoretical underpinnings.

All interview transcripts were then subjected to a detailed content analysis (Paisley, 1969), to identify and analyse the presence and meaning of common themes (Kassarjian, 1977) related to successful destination brand building. The conceptual content analysis was conducted for all interview transcripts through which the main destination branding imperatives were identified and relevant conclusions were developed (Krippendorff, 1980).

NVivo software was used to systematise, categorise, and code the interview data. The choice of NVivo was dictated by several factors including the sample size (18 interviews), the type of interviews (semi-structured), and researchers' plan for high proximity to the data and meaningful engagement in the analysis process and data interpretation (Sotiriadou *et al.*, 2014).

Being the principal source of evidence, the transcripts were coded with the aid of the concepts identified by individual researchers and the literature. Following the data analysis process proposed by Stoian *et al.* (2018), the researchers first identified 1st-order codes within the interviews, which were then merged into 2nd-order theoretical level themes (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). To reassure intercoder agreement and reliability (Campbell *et al.*, 2013), the final coding was modified on the basis of an iterative process of group discussion. External validity was also ascertained with an independent researcher being selected to re-code individual passages of text within interviews that the research team had identified as critical for destination branding (Sandelowski, 1986). A high degree of consensus was revealed, given that the independent rater followed a similar decision trail and arrived at the same or comparable, but not contradictory, conclusions (Koch, 1994; Sendjaya *et al.*, 2008). Specifically, an inter-rater reliability coefficient average of 0.88 emerged, which exceeds Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommended rate of 0.70. Table 2 presents the two higher-order themes, along with their 1st order codes (nodes in NVivo). For each code, the table provides a) indicative direct quotes from the participants to increase trustworthiness (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Nowell *et al.*, 2017), b) the number of interviews where the node appeared at least once, c) the number of individual passages of text within these interviews coded at this node, and d) the respective inter-rater reliability indicator.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Table 2: Analysing the interview data / coding scheme – destination branding imperatives as reported by Hotel managers, Restaurant managers and DMO representatives

The results are presented in the following section enhanced by data gained from the field-interviews presented as direct quotes.

Research Findings

The findings are presented in this section and are divided into two parts (destination brand development and destination brand maintenance over time), with the aim to understand the building blocks for the successful development of destination branding strategy through co-creation. The data structure explains the proposed framework (see Table 2) and the research findings that delve into the destination branding imperatives, extracted from the direct quotes by participants (Hotel Managers – HM, Restaurant Managers – RM and DMO key-representatives – DM). Figure 1 highlights the two main pillars of destination branding that emerged from the research, namely, destination brand development and destination brand maintenance over time, and depicts A2A interactions in the tourism ecosystem.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1: Destination branding and value co-creation: beyond dyadic interactions

Destination brand development

The data analysis highlighted the first pillar of destination branding and co-creation. The first pillar refers to destination brand development and delineates the process followed by all actors involved to analyse the destination brand, develop the destination brand positioning, and to share the destination brand values within the ecosystem.

Brand analysis

Brand analysis refers to the culmination of market intelligence shared among the actors across levels to unveil tourists' brand needs, competitive brand offerings, and internal brand

destination capabilities (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Balakrishnan, 2009; de Chernatony *et al.*, 2011; Huang and Tsai, 2013). A DMO representative (DM3) explained:

To change the profile of the island we should first understand that each form of tourism may foster a micro-ecosystem which falls under the umbrella of the broader tourism ecosystem.

Cooperation in relation to market intelligence generation is important as mentioned (DM2):

We should get first-hand information on the visitors' perceptions about our competences, for example, cleanliness, infrastructure, accessibility, healthcare services, gastronomy and culture, among others.

Additional elements have to be examined and analysed (HM1, RM1) and may refer to the “*visible and invisible aspects of services*” e.g. location, management response, facilities, storytelling about the wine served, good service. Placing greater emphasis on the necessity for a common understanding of customer needs, one hotel manager (HM2) admitted that:

The second more difficult job is ours; the first is doctor's work; both address human needs, the one heals the pain whereas the other awakens the pleasure.

This stage may lead to an initial understanding of the involvement of visitors in the tourism ecosystem in terms of the value they attribute to the destination brand. The main focus is to provide answers to questions such as: What are the characteristics that tourists consider when selecting a destination? What are the functional, emotional, and/or self-expressive benefits that emerge as part of co-created experiences at destinations? What feedback is gained from current and potential tourists on the strengths and limitations of destinations, the aspects of

culture, accessibility, and accommodation in combination with the respective geographical and morphological settings? On the basis of these discussions, a more stable foundation may guide actors to develop the positioning strategy for the destination.

Brand positioning development

Based on the findings generated from a thorough tourist, competitor, and self-analysis and shared among the actors within the ecosystem, the destination should be in a solid position to clarify its unique brand identity. What the destination stands for will provide direction and purpose for the future (Keller 2000a; Cai, 2002; Coleman *et al.*, 2015). For example, multiple DMO representatives commented on brand positioning, which should capitalise on the recent official proclamation of the region i.e. “*South Aegean Region as European Region of Gastronomy 2019*” (DM1, DM2, DM3). Stressing the role of positioning, another interviewee (HM5) noted:

People from all over the world are eager to buy our product, they can afford it... we should synchronise the image of the destination accordingly, since the way they perceive us depends on their involvement in all the stages of travel, even before coming or after leaving the island.

This step results in the co-creation of brand positioning that successfully reflects the part of the brand identity that is to be actively shared with the target audience. Brand positioning development sets the direction of marketing activities and programmes for current tourists and visitors who are “virtually there” via the web (Romanazzi, *et al.*, 2011). It also creates key brand associations in the minds of tourists and other stakeholders that differentiate the destination brand in a meaningful way (Aaker, 1996; Urde, 1999; Blain *et al.*, 2005; Ghodeswar, 2008; Balakrishnan, 2009). A hotel manager (HM7) noted:

*We definitely don't want to be perceived as 'another destination' but
'the destination'.*

To be effectively developed and efficiently shared with all the actors, destination brand positioning must be close to reality, believable, simple, appealing, and distinctive. In the context of co-creation, actors should share resources for destination brand positioning development beyond the logic of delivery of promises (Kotler and Gertner, 2002).

Shared brand values

Evidence from the literature shows that destination brand positioning must be effectively communicated to all actors, in order to create a common understanding of the destination brand values, create positive beliefs and attitudes towards the brand (e.g. Davis *et al.*, 2003; Tybout and Calkins, 2005; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005; Merrilees and Frazer, 2013; Piehler *et al.*, 2016), and facilitate the branding process (e.g. Keller, 1999; Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; Balakrishnan, 2009; Ind and Coates, 2013; Ind *et al.*, 2013; Liu *et al.*, 2017). Positioning should be addressed and deployed with tourists and visitors, in terms of the value attributed by them to the brand (Merz *et al.*, 2018). This was reflected in various responses:

*It is not a one-man show, it is a teamwork where the values are shared
with the region, local authorities, hotel associations, managers, employees,
entrepreneurs etc. (DM3).*

*"We should all feel devoted to the values we share, we should be
passionate about our job, our role in the industry" (RM1).*

The institutions prevalent in the tourism ecosystem may hinder, support, or reignite the values commonly shared with actors from the local community. In this context, the private and public sector need to align with, subscribe to, and embrace the destination's vision of

what it is, what it stands for, and where it is going (Anholt, 2004). Referring to the role of institutions within the ecosystem, respondents reflected this understanding.

It is usually said that sharing is caring; but to share and work effectively, we have to believe in respect towards and from the other parties (RM5).

Mutual respect is the glue that can bind us together (HM6).

We should all work as if we have adopted the meaning of the well-known motto, 'we are ladies and gentlemen, serving ladies and gentlemen' (HM1).

Extending previous research findings (Piha and Avlonitis, 2018), the co-creation of the brands' promise for and with the tourists is guaranteed following a common assimilation of destination brand values by all the actors involved.

Destination brand maintenance over time

Destination brand development is necessary but not a sufficient condition for the co-creation of a successful destination brand. In this context, the foundational premises of R-A theory (Hunt, 2000) may provide further insight into the link between the resources shared among the principal stakeholders (e.g. actors' competences) and the destination's sustainable competitive advantage. Thus, to co-create destination branding within the tourism ecosystem, all actors should be engaged with a strategy developed to unfold in time. To this end, the empirical evidence demonstrates that after a destination brand has been successfully developed, it must be sustained and strengthened in the long run (as destination brand maintenance over time). This is a four-step procedure as discussed below:

Consistency and actor-to-actor coordination

Consistency and actor-to-actor coordination ensures that the essence of the destination brand remains consistent across all A2A contact points with tourists being the central focal point (e.g. Keller 2000b; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Hankinson, 2007; Balakrishnan, 2009; Charters, 2009; Beverland *et al.*, 2015; Kenyon *et al.*, 2018). On the grounds that different actors belong to different levels within the ecosystem (e.g. micro, meso, macro), multilevel engagement is crucial as reflected by one respondent.

Horizontal and vertical interactions regularly occur; further to public consultations, which may build trust among the members involved, many opportunities arise to coordinate our actions through educational programmes, lifelong learning, access to finance, seminars and events etc (DM4).

The way institutions disseminate this message to all levels and foster or strengthen relationships among the actors is characteristically delineated.

Tourism firms, locals and all stakeholders did not have any experience with a refugee crisis before... we did not issue any manual or follow guidelines, but thanks to self-planning and coordination, we managed to limit the negative impact on the destination brand (DM3).

The respondents generally shared the managerial understanding of the DMO's facilitating role and the important role of hotels and restaurants in co-creating the destination brand together with other actors e.g. visitors and tourists, employees, local authorities, chambers and associations, universities, agricultural sector, transport, tour operators, suppliers, (HM4, RM6, DM2).

I would strive a lot to find who is not part of this process... it is really difficult to find someone who is not part of the ecosystem (HM1).

Another respondent stated that:

All parties are interdependent... if the DMO effectively promotes the island, then hotels, restaurants, cafés etc. should support its activities and create new opportunities all together (RM2).

Despite the variety of views, interests and agendas amid the actors, respondents reflected support of the coordination role of the institutional entities. For example:

...confrontational situations can be alleviated or even eliminated if and only if institutional entities act as a breakwater (DM3).

However, unless consensus is achieved, the programme for destination branding is destined to fail (Anholt, 2004) and the actors may feel that they strive to support the brand all alone “*acting like Don Quixote on the island*” (RM1).

Long-term commitment by the government

The respondent also stressed the need for long-term commitment by the government to support the development and diffusion of the destination brand values across multiple stakeholders (Piha and Avlonitis, 2018). This would help to generate an ongoing commitment by all actors to the destination brand, encourage brand supportive behaviour, and facilitate the consistency previously discussed (e.g. Tybout and Calkins, 2005; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005; Hankinson, 2007; Matanda and Ndubisi, 2013; Punjaisri *et al.*, 2013; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016). It was also noted with emphasis by one respondent that:

...of course, cooperation is an essential part in this process, but governmental authorities should promptly reply to our requests, especially in mid-season (RM3).

Additionally, as one of the managers explained:

Central government should continuously support the work of the entire Region and our services throughout the years; to be more specific, the development of infrastructure, improvement of transportation, regulations for opening hours of museums etc. should not be parachute-like activities or fireworks only for big electoral events (HM2).

In line with the other respondents' interpretations, a DMO representative suggested that:

...cooperation with the government should not be theoretical-only with mere focus on promotional activities, but should draw the balance between the actors, tourism providers, locals, tourists and the society overall (DM4).

This suggests that any difference or congruence between shared institutions may influence the progress of A2A interactions.

Destination brand portfolio management

Evidence from this qualitative study demonstrates that the evolutionary process of various destinations that fall under the umbrella of a regional or national DMO calls for effective destination brand portfolio management. DMO representatives set the context “*in a cluster of 49 islands, meaning 49 autonomous tourism ecosystems*” (DM1), implying the necessity of successfully managing the multiple different “product” brands of the region, in a way that enables synergies to be fostered, brand assets to be leveraged, and any confusion of the

destination brand in tourists' mind to be eliminated (Aaker, 2004; Chailan, 2008). Co-creation in destination branding entails an inclusive effort for all the destinations. For example, the visual representation should encapsulate the identity of the region:

...in our case, the brand points to the geographic fragmentation and island dispersion of the Cyclades and the Dodecanese (DM3).

However, collaborative efforts for destination brand portfolio management can be accelerated or delayed because of the prevailing institutions, as cited by one respondent.

...when you try to cope with the challenges of a mature destination with an established mass-tourism mindset, it is as if you are dealing with the Methuselah generation (DM4).

Following this line of reasoning, every tourism product requires special branding efforts and the growing interest for the shift from mass tourism to special interest tourism, based on travel motivation (Kladou *et al.*, 2014; Assiouras *et al.*, 2015) and cannot be overlooked. For example, *“the European Region of Gastronomy 2019 and the organisation of new cultural and sports events on the smaller islands”* (DM1).

Periodic monitoring of brand performance

Opting for success in destination branding through co-creation, the respondents repeatedly mentioned that the periodic monitoring of brand performance features was the lifeblood of the entire process. This perception is in line with the literature, which supports monitoring activities to co-create the service experience (Carù and Cova, 2015). The following quote exemplifies how evaluation engenders co-creation by sharing resources at this final stage and also probes visitors to attribute value to the brand through positive word-of-mouth (Zhang *et al.*, 2018) and user-generated-content (Viglia *et al.*, 2016; Williams *et al.*, 2015; Williams *et al.*, 2017):

.... the value is not extracted from statistics only but is daily assessed against the numerous interactions per se; for example, when locals are asked to give information to tourists, their positive stance and behaviour will create value with the tourist, which will yield positive word-of-mouth effects; visitors will write a positive review, share a video ... so, when you are ready to provide added value, you will receive added value as well; this additional value is then diffused to all the parties in the ecosystem (DM3).

The words of a hotel manager reflect a reliance on the qualitative feedback from actors' efforts:

.... we should refer not only to the hardware (glasses, tables, and bottles) but to the heartware (heart, mind, and soul) of services as well; in fact, only when the guest has filled his heart, mind, and soul with memorable experiences, will the team say that we have done a good job (HM1).

To this end, formal and informal market-based research and any generation of relevant information will provide the principal tools for all actors to identify gaps in their perceptions (e.g. tourist-local perceptions) towards the destination brand and consequently refine, if necessary, the branding efforts (e.g. Keller, 2000b; Aaker, 2004; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Ghodeswar, 2008; de Chernatony *et al.*, 2011; Gromark and Melin, 2011). As another respondent reflected:

...it is through this feedback that value is co-created, and we can readjust or redesign our strategy (HM7).

Brand performance assessment can be guaranteed through regulative and normative institutions shared among the actors across levels as suggested by DMO respondents. For example:

....there are specific rules which certify the acceptance of a member in the affiliate network of Aegean Cuisine; we have to follow the standards in terms of supplies and agricultural products first so as to upgrade the value of the tourism product overall (DM2).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to develop a brand co-creation framework in the context of destinations. This could only be achieved by examining the role of various stakeholders in the co-creation of powerful destination brands that attract global attention and preference. Research respondents cited issues reflected in the literature and thereby principal common threads emerge from the critical examination of empirical evidence against theory. Co-creation initiatives (e.g. Kennedy, 2019) such as the sharing of ideas, brand skills and knowledge, creativity, expertise, facilities, technologies etc. can instigate numerous interactions between the stakeholders (i.e. actors) along a stepwise process. The findings from this study demonstrate that resource sharing in a value-creation ecosystem within a destination context is a precondition for actor-to-actor interactions to flourish, thereby urging DMOs and their counterparts to carry out contingent activities, leading to better and long-lasting results.

Theoretical implications

In the field of a dynamic co-creation setting and an evolving brand logic (Merz *et al.*, 2009), the meaning of branding in the destination context is considered an organically evolving concept. Drawing on institutional theory (Scott, 2008), the suggested framework

contributes to the expansion of the relevant literature under a service ecosystem perspective and contributes to the theory of branding in the following ways.

First, extending the findings of previous studies (Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018), the research shows that customers are not the only responsible in brand co-creation, but brand development rests on various stakeholders' hearts and minds. The proposed framework distils the theoretical background of branding in the destination context (Almeyda-Ibáñez and Babu, 2017), through an A2A perspective (Vargo and Lusch, 2018), to unveil the steps potential actors may follow for brand co-creation. As shown in the framework, specific co-creating activities are critical for the sustainability of destination brands. Thus, the study advocates a new approach for future academic research.

Second, following the academic debate surrounding S-D logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2018), the branding process takes place within the co-created ecosystem. Following this logic, there is no full or direct control over the process (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017) by a single organisation such as a DMO. This study goes beyond destination brand development to rest on two main pillars (i.e. destination brand development and maintenance over time), extending the findings of previous studies, which suggest that co-creating a destination brand may be the source of a long-term competitive advantage (Hunt, 2000) for all the actors within the ecosystem of tourism.

Third, this study stresses the importance of multiple influences (to-whom and from-whom) in the brand co-creation process in the tourism context. As suggested in the literature (Sarkar and Banerjee, 2019; Iordanova and Stylidis, 2019), the higher the level of co-operation and co-creation will strengthen market intelligence and help the destinations to stay relevant in the tourists' minds. To achieve this, the findings of this work argue that co-creation is the *raison d'être* of effective destination management, where operand and operant resources are commonly shared between the actors along the destination branding process. For example,

time, place, facilities, services, brand skills, creativity, brand knowledge, and expertise are shared to perform brand analysis, adopt shared brand values, and achieve consistency and actor-to-actor coordination. Likewise, the results bring new insights to the sharing of resources between actors for a sustainable destination branding strategy, building on brand value co-creation (Merz *et al.*, 2018).

Fourth, the study acknowledges the role of the various levels in the ecosystem and the underlying mechanisms of brand co-creation in the somewhat neglected branding domain. It is the first study to empirically investigate the actors involved in the brand co-creation process depending on their position in the ecosystem (at distinct levels). Earlier work has focused on the demand side (France *et al.*, 2020) and the roles in brand image co-creation (Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018), while the importance of the ecosystem structure has been overlooked. Hence, this paper adopts a service ecosystem perspective to explain the importance of prevailing institutions and different levels in co-creation in the destination brand, offering new insights into the extant literature (Saraniemi and Kylänen, 2011). The empirical evidence sheds some light on the role of institutions to enable researchers to understand how the interactions among a full range of actors and multiple levels of aggregations (micro, meso, and macro) elucidate the brand co-creation process. In this context, institutions can accelerate or hinder the facilitating role of DMOs to orchestrate all the actors of the tourism ecosystem throughout the brand co-creation process.

Managerial implications

This study presents a brief overview of how branding and co-creation are achieved in practice in the destination context. It is the first to examine brand co-creation from a service ecosystem perspective (beyond the demand and supply-side research focus) also offering preliminary empirical evidence on how different stakeholders at different levels can shape the brand value. The way the framework is delineated into specific activities engaging various

actors in a value-creating ecosystem validates previous findings (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017) that the effectiveness of brand meaning stems from its multidirectional flow through myriad contact points.

Applied to the tourism sector, brand co-creation resides at multiple levels and can only be performed through the active engagement of multiple actors (e.g. governmental authorities, tourists, local residents, associations, chambers of hotels and commerce, local, regional DMOs, tourism businesses and other organisations directly or indirectly related to tourism). The qualitative findings explore why no single actor can possess the required skills to build and successfully sustain a brand over time (Sarkar and Banerjee, 2019). The work also explains the main components and clearly delineates the steps that contribute to a common understanding of the overall branding strategy in the destination context (what-to-do and in-what-order). More specifically, destination brand co-creation presupposes deep market intelligence shared among the actors across levels and the consecutive development of a distinct brand positioning which must be effectively communicated to all actors. Consistency of the destination brand values across all actor-to-actor touchpoints is indispensable. Long-term government commitment is also required to guarantee support for the destination brand and to facilitate stakeholder coordination. A solid destination branding strategy should consider how the destination is managed under the regional or national brand portfolio and should continuously monitor actors' perceptions regarding the destination brand and refine the branding efforts accordingly. Therefore, the brand co-creation process is facilitated in terms of principal actors' identification (i.e. who-is-who and where it belongs in the multilevel service ecosystem) and task assignments across the different levels (i.e. customer-to-customer, firm-to-customer, government-to-business, business-to-business interactions etc.).

The study empirically reveals the emerging role of branding as an experience provider (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017) through multiple touchpoints in a value-creating ecosystem generating mindfulness and resourcefulness in thoughts, emotions, and memories. To this end, the proposed framework incites tourism stakeholders to build sustainable destination brands that might take a special place in visitors' hearts and minds. All the actors within the tourism ecosystem, namely, DMOs and other tourism stakeholders can share a common vision experienced through daily practice and interaction.

Co-creating a coherent destination branding strategy offers opportunities for synergies between national, regional, and local entities in the same frame of reference (i.e. destination lifecycle, forms of tourism, profile of tourists etc.). This frame of reference capitalises on the nested approach of the ecosystem, where layers of actions, interactions, and mutual influences can help contextualise the reality and any underlying mechanisms. Tapping into the inherent complexity of destinations and the multi-disciplinary nature of tourism, the service ecosystem perspective enhances the integrity of brand co-creation at destinations, considering congruent and conflicting interests (e.g. tourists and local residents, hotel competitors, restaurant owners and hotel managers at all-inclusive units etc.).

Similarly, problems in the application of building a strong and viable destination brand over time can be identified through a stepwise approach and calls for further action. Urging collaboration, initiatives can rely on relevant norms, rules, symbols, meanings, and practices (Vargo and Lusch, 2018) to develop legislative frameworks, apply existing regulations with penalties, follow local norms, and act according to regional ethics. For example, public-private partnerships may be impeded due to reactions or legal delays or fostered by fewer constraints due to a fast-tracked legislative process.

Key-actors from both the private and the public sector in the tourism ecosystem are invited to treat destination branding as a co-creation initiative taking place with the tourists, the locals

and other parties rather than addressed towards them. Tourists and visitors may attribute value to the destination brand in real-time (Buhalis and Sinarta, 2019). Considering that the co-creation of a strong destination brand may not be easily engendered and maintained over time, any similar effort might be perceived as an additional and distinct form of sustainable competitive advantage.

Limitations and future research agenda

In an attempt to increase the conceptual and empirical body of knowledge, the authors suggest that further research on the proposed framework may lead to a concise theory pertaining to the development of a long-lasting branding strategy. A much-needed quantitative research design applied to this framework would enlighten all the aspects of brand co-creation by testing the generalisability of the findings. It may include the creation or destruction of value (France *et al.*, 2020) and examine whether brand polarisation (Ramírez *et al.*, 2019) may be derived from different actors in the ecosystem. Actors' roles within brand relationship building has yet to be examined (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2019).

Adopting a service ecosystem perspective, brand value propositions can be further investigated in terms of resource offerings amid actors within the micro, meso and macro-level (Frow *et al.*, 2014). Provided that resources are shared and value emerges from A2A interactions, e.g. customer-to-customer value co-creation (Rihova *et al.*, 2018), value propositions may play a significant role in determining which actors interact with the ecosystem and how resources are commonly shared, in the context of destinations.

Following this rationale, cognitive, regulative, and normative institutions (Scott, 2008) might also be examined. In this vein, the role of smart technologies (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2015) and blockchain technology (Boukis, 2020) should not be ignored in future research efforts, since the far-reaching progress of technology includes a process of institutional continuity, disruption and modification, namely, institutionalisation (Vargo *et al.*, 2015). Likewise, A2A

interactions tend to be reshaped or even replaced with technology-to-technology interactions (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016). Customer engagement may be transformed in the online service setting (Parihar and Dawra, 2020). Brand building and brand engagement are reconsidered through social media (Lou *et al.*, 2019; Ferreira *et al.*, 2020), and significant challenges are proposed for the service ecosystem as a result of technological disruptions (Buhalis *et al.*, 2019). Addressing the disruptive loop process of technological advancements, future studies may approach the way new institutions emerge from the changing configurations in resource integration within the service ecosystem.

A successful brand co-creation process can act as a catalyst to identify brand ambassadors and brand volunteers (Cova *et al.*, 2015). Building on the notion of customer citizenship behaviour in the service ecosystem and the adoption of the social exchange theory in the field of tourism (Assiouras *et al.*, 2019), this study may provide novel insights into the maximisation of the benefit of co-creation for all the actors involved.

On the grounds that the conceptualisation of brand co-creation under the service ecosystem perspective was missing from the tourism research agenda, this study may be considered as a foundation for knowledge extension in this field.

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Appendix A

Interview guide

i. Introduction: tourism as a service ecosystem

- What are your main tourism activities?
- Do you foster partnerships with other parties (companies, organisations etc.)?
- Why is it (not) necessary to cooperate with others in the tourism industry?
- Regarding destination competitiveness, how do you perceive your role in the tourism industry?
- Would you perceive tourism as an ecosystem of services with close interdependence?

ii. Destination Brand: notion and importance

- What do you believe a destination brand is?
- Do you think a brand for a destination is important at regional/country level?

iii. Destination Branding Process: roles and co-creation

- Who is involved in the destination branding process of the island?
- Do all the parties have to participate in this process? Are they invited? Or they are just informed about the final output?
- What is the level of coordination in the destination branding process?
- Is the destination brand of the island supported by all the parties involved?
- What is the role of the tourists in this case? Are they directly or indirectly involved somehow?

iv. Suggestions: towards successful destination branding

- If we talk about a brand-oriented destination, what specific activities would it undertake?

- Would you mention anything you perceive as very important for the destination to build a successful brand?