**ARTICLE**

# Value Co-Creation in Hotels: the views of Hotel Employees

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## ABSTRACT

Customer engagement in value co-creation is a key strategy to enhance company performance and strategic advantage. Although frontline employees play an important role in customer engagement – particularly in high contact services such as hotels – little research has tried to understand how employees view the value co-creation process. Hence, this study explores how hotel employees view the value co-creation process in hotels, by considering the motivations and roles of consumers and providers, and the outcomes of customer engagement in the value co-creation process. Analysis of qualitative data from an exploratory focus group with experts and context interviews with hotel employees finds mostly similarities in the way experts and employees view the value co-creation process but also some differences. Employee interviews reveal systematic attempts to engage customers in value co-creation only in high-end hotels. An overwhelming consensus is identified among participants that co-creation has a critical influence in enhancing customer experience and hotel performance.

## KEYWORDS

value co-creation, hotels, frontline employees

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# A cocriação de valor em hotéis: uma perspetiva dos funcionários do setor hoteleiro

**RESUMO**

O envolvimento do cliente na cocriação de valor é uma estratégia-chave para melhorar o desempenho e a vantagem estratégica da empresa. Embora os funcionários de contacto desempenhem um papel importante no envolvimento do cliente – principalmente em serviços de alto contato, como hotéis – poucas pesquisas tentaram entender como os funcionários veem o processo de cocriação de valor. Assim, este estudo explora como funcionários de hotéis percebem o processo de cocriação de valor em hotéis, considerando tanto as motivações e os papéis dos consumidores e hoteleiros, como as consequências do envolvimento do cliente no processo de cocriação de valor. A análise de dados qualitativos de um grupo focal exploratório com especialistas em cocriação e de entrevistas com funcionários de hotéis revela sobretudo a existência de semelhanças no modo como especialistas e funcionários encaram o processo de cocriação de valor; no entanto, algumas diferenças são também encontradas. As entrevistas com funcionários revelam que uma tentativa sistemática de envolver os clientes na cocriação de valor apenas se verifica em hotéis de gama alta. É identificado um consenso entre os participantes de que a cocriação tem uma influência crítica na melhoria da experiência do cliente e do desempenho hoteleiro.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

cocriação de valor, hotéis, funcionários de contato

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Research on interactive value co-creation activities has become one of the top priorities in marketing as well as tourism research (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Ranjan & Read, 2014). Value co-creation is defined as a joint process which involves customers and a provider creating some output of value (Harkison, 2018). Oyner and Korelina (2016) assert that value co-creation can create unique customer value by enabling the personalisation of experiences, which affects customer satisfaction and loyalty. Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer (2012) state that co-creation activities can give two major sources of strategic advantages. One of these is productivity gains through efficiency, lower costs, and reduced risks; the other is gains in the effectiveness of the co-created offerings, increased revenues, profits, and innovativeness (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). In the tourism and hotel industry, interactive value co-creation is especially important because hotel services rely on direct interaction with customers (Morosan & DeFranco, 2016; Oyner & Korelina, 2016). As Chathoth et al. (2013) argue, value co-creation can help a hotel differentiate itself in a competitive environment.

Frontline employees play a critical role in the value co-creation process (Yeboah et al., 2022). Various studies have analysed a number of factors which can affect employee engagement in value co-creation, such as situational and personal factors (Chathoth et al., 2020), organisational factors (e.g., flexibility, empowerment, brand standards, service systems) (Chathoth et al., 2022), an understanding of brand values (Nguyen et al., 2021), or emotional intelligence (Boadi et al., 2020). According to Barnes et al. (2020), employee-tourist relations are more "intimate, interactive, and reciprocal" (Barnes et al., 2020, p. 374) than in other types of businesses, such as attractions or stores, where tourists spend less time with employees. Hence, tourist-employee encounters in hotels are important for shaping experiential value, memorable experiences, and recommendation intentions (Barnes et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to understand hotel

frontline employees' views of the value co-creation process in their hotels, as suggested by previous studies (e.g., Chathoth et al., 2020).

This study seeks to address the following research question: *how do hotel frontline employees view the value co-creation process in their hotels?* Three specific objectives are defined to address the research question: i) to identify providers' and consumers' motivations and roles in value co-creation, according to hotel frontline employees; ii) to identify the outcomes of value co-creation, according to hotel frontline employees; and iii) to understand to what extent hotel frontline employees view the co-creation process differently from experts on co-creation.

To attain these objectives, and since research in value co-creation has been mostly quantitative (e.g., Boadi et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2019), a qualitative study, including exploratory focus groups with experts, and context interviews with hotel employees, was carried out. The results of interviews with experts and with hotel employees were compared.

In the next section, the theoretical background of this study is presented. Then, the research methodology is explained. Following this, the results of the empirical study are presented. The first part of the results section focuses on motivations and roles in the value co-creation process, while the second focuses on the outcomes of value co-creation. Results are briefly discussed in light of the theoretical background. The study concludes with implications of the results, limitations, and avenues for future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. THE VALUE CO-CREATION PROCESS

Value co-creation is a result of mutually beneficial, interdependent, and collaborative relationships among participating actors but always involves, and is determined by, the beneficiary (Vargo et al., 2008). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) pointed out that co-creation is the interaction between the customer and company to create value. Co-creation is a process from which organisations gain competencies and knowledge of specific customers so that they can use this information to their advantage and provide an 'experience' for them (Harkison, 2018). Moreover, Vargo et al. (2017) argue that the value is created not only in a dyadic interaction but also in an interconnected web of interactions and exchanges in value constellations. The systemic approach and contextual nature of value co-creation give rise to the 'service ecosystem' framework where the focus is on multiple levels of interactions and institutions, social norms, and collaborative meanings as drivers of value creation (Vargo et al., 2017). A service ecosystem is a comparatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of actors who create mutual value through resource integration and service for service exchange (Vargo et al., 2017). Vargo et al. (2017) also highlight the phenomenological nature of value, which is perceived experientially and differently by different actors in varying social and cultural contexts in a service ecosystem. In this research, we define value co-creation as an interactive process of exchange and integration of resources of participating actors who engage in service for service exchange to co-create mutual value (benefits/wellbeing) which is phenomenologically perceived and determined by the beneficiary.

Value is not something embedded in things, it emerges from customers' value generation processes (Chandler & Lusch, 2015; Grönroos, 2008). These processes start with value propositions which establish connections and relationships among service systems (Chandler & Lusch, 2015; Vargo et al., 2008). Value proposition is defined as an invitation from one actor to another to engage in service exchange (Chandler & Lusch, 2015). Once a service provider proposes a value in the market, it is accepted, rejected, or remains unnoticed by other service systems in need of

resources (Vargo et al., 2008). On accepting the proposition, other systems agree to engage in interactive service for service exchange (Vargo et al., 2008). These interactions and networks are central to value co-creation (Vargo et al., 2010). Value creation is a continuous process, and it is determined through experiences. However, customers may either not want or not be interesting in engaging with the firm due to lack of awareness or inability to communicate properly (Rust & Thomson, 2006). Nevertheless, Chandler and Lusch (2015) assert that value propositions engage actors such as customers, suppliers, distributors, buyers, sellers, and others who want to attain financial and social value. This value co-creation process is also evident from empirical studies. For example, Harkison's (2018) empirical study in the hotel industry finds that participant managers, employees, and guests saw co-creation in many different forms of interaction happening between the participant groups to create the guest experience. Similarly, Oyner and Korelina's (2016) research on hostels find examples of customer engagement to co-create value in hostels.

Customer engagement is essential for value co-creation. Pansari and Kumar (2017) define customer engagement as the mechanisms of customers' value addition to the firm through direct and/or indirect contributions. The direct contribution to the firm is the customer`s purchase while indirect contributions comprise customer referral, customer influence, and customer knowledge (Gupta et al., 2018). In contrast, Brodie et al. (2011) define customer engagement as a psychological state formed by the interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object in focal service relationship. The inclusion of contextual, iterative, multidimensional, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects of makes their definition of customer engagement a comprehensive one.

Brodie et al. (2011) argue that customer engagement occurs in a dynamic service relationship process which co-creates value. According to this argument, the customer engagement process is the antecedent of value co-creation. For Brodie et al. (2011), a specific interactive experience is an indispensable component of customer engagement. This interactive, co-creative process is also central and explicit to the value co-creation process (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). As Grönroos (2008) asserts, the interaction is the co-creator of the service experience and the value-in-use. Some examples of such co-created value are favourably perceived firm/customers communications, service delivery, and dialogue (Brodie et al., 2011).

## 2.2. Value Co-creation in the Tourism and Hotel Industry

The tourism industry is a high-contact service industry in which co-creation of customers' experiences plays a vital role (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). Many customers in this industry create their own experience by searching for and arranging holidays online (Litvin et al., 2008; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006), such as customers of the airline industry who co-create value by booking flights online (Gross & Schroder, 2007). Collaboration with customers is important for the hotel industry (Shaw et al., 2011). A case study based on interviews conducted by Shaw et al. (2011) with hotel managers of selected hotels in the United Kingdom finds evidence of the contributions made by customers to the co-creation of innovation. However, Wu et al. (2017) argue that Shaw et al. (2011) research concentrated only on the co-creation and innovation in hotel IT systems. Moving toward a co-creation environment, hotels can increase their ability to differentiate themselves in a competitive environment (Chathoth et al., 2013). For example, it may create barriers to imitation and can result in improved customer loyalty, enhanced customer satisfaction, unique positive experiences, and enhanced overall profitability. Furthermore, Wu et al. (2017) online survey research among mobile hotel bookers in China finds that hotels are recognising co-creation by using guests' feedback and individual history to personalise a hotel's

services accordingly. Based on the findings, they suggest that hotels need to improve perceived value for customers to achieve a competitive advantage. However, most of this research is concentrated on either IT-based co-creation practices or partial co-creation activities within a hotel context. This leaves a gap within which to conduct research that examines broader value co-creation with customers.

## 2.3. ROLES OF PROVIDERS AND CUSTOMERS IN VALUE CO-CREATION

Merging the roles of providers and customers eventually creates a unique co-creation experience which helps providers gain a source of competitive advantage by collaborating with customers (Wu et al., 2017). The role of providers is, as value facilitators, to provide customers with a foundation for value creation in the form of resources, and the role of customers is, as value creators, to generate value for themselves by interacting and integrating the provider's resources with their own resources and competences (Grönroos, 2008). Providers should develop co-creation opportunities with customers, implement customer solutions, and manage customer encounters (Payne et al., 2008). On accepting value propositions, customers take part in a dynamic value creation process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Shaw et al. (2011) case study research provides evidence of three roles of customers in the co-creation process: users, buyers, and payers. Furthermore, Harkison's (2018) empirical research on the hotel industry finds that hotel managers interact and engage with customers when they arrive to facilitate customers' participation in creating a great experience for themselves.

## 2.4. MOTIVATING FACTORS TO ENGAGE IN VALUE CO-CREATION ACTIVITIES

Identifying actors' motivating factors to engage in value creation is critical for firms (Pera et al., 2016). Firms' motivation to engage in co-creation is driven by extrinsic factors focused on economic results, long and short-term goals, and specific objectives. For customers, the motivating factors involve reputation enhancement, experimentation, and relationship motives (Pera et al., 2016). Similarly, Füller (2010) argues that consumers' motivation to participate in co-creation can be dominated by intrinsic factors, such as fun and enjoyment of creativity. When customers engage in interactions with the provider, they use the foundations and resources provided by the firm and their own knowledge and skills to co-create a unique experience, which can be fun and enjoyable for them. Wu et al. (2017) research suggests that self-enhancement and economic rewards are the two major concrete motivating factors for hotel customers to engage in value co-creation activities.

## 2.5. OUTCOMES OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT IN THE VALUE CO-CREATION PROCESS

Within dynamic and interactive business environment, customer engagement generates enhanced performance and competitive advantage (Brodie et al., 2011). This notion is expressed by Pansari and Kumar's (2017) definition, where they outline that customers make direct and/ or indirect contributions to firms through the customer engagement mechanism. They consider customer purchases as direct contribution and customer referrals, customer influence, and customer knowledge as indirect contributions. According to Pansari and Kumar (2017), the firm's focus here is to maximise the profit from customers over a long period of time. Customer referral is a form of customer engagement that helps attract customers who would not be attracted by the traditional marketing efforts (Kumar & Pansari, 2016), thus contributing indirectly to firm performance (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Moreover, Kumar and Pansari (2016) state that referred customers are more profitable compared to non-referred customers. Customer influence is the

impact customers make on social media platforms (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Pansari and Kumar (2017) argue that social media influences create a chain reaction across a wide group of customers and indirectly impacts the firm's profits. Customer knowledge is referred to through customer feedback and suggestions which are used to improve products and services (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). This can also help firms develop knowledge by understanding their customers' preferences (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). All three of these have an indirect impact on a firm's performance, which combined with direct impacts enhance a firm's competitive edge in the marketplace.

### 2.6. THE IMPORTANCE OF FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES IN THE VALUE CO-CREATION PROCESS

Tourism experiences have become more important than perceived features of tourism products (Scott et al., 2009; Harkison, 2018). In this context, the emphasis is increasingly more on interaction between consumer and producer rather than product (Scott et al., 2009). This is particularly applicable to hospitality, which has the characteristic of inseparability, i.e., it requires the simultaneous presence of both guests and staff (Harkison, 2018). Therefore, it is essential to understanding how customers and staff interact to co-create and generate win-win situations (Grönroos, 2011; Xie et al., 2019).

However, employees have been devoted relatively little attention by value co-creation research in hotels (Harkison, 2018). Previous studies have revealed the importance of front-office employees for value co-creation in the hotel sector (e.g., Santos-Vijande et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2017). There has been some investigation on the factors that affect employee engagement and their facilitation of value co-creation. Some of the main factors analysed have been situational and personal (Chathoth et al., 2020), organisational (e.g., flexibility, empowerment, brand standards, service systems) (Chathoth et al., 2022), an understanding of brand values (Nguyen et al., 2021), emotional intelligence (Boadi et al., 2020), and customer need knowledge (Xie et al., 2019).

According to Ramaswamy (2009), co-creative organisations require the active engagement of all frontline employees. However, employees in upscale and luxury hotels may have a higher level of engagement than those in other hotel types (e.g., economy or mid-scale) (Chathoth et al., 2020). This may be a result of the higher level of intangibility in value co-creation in such hotels, which requires a higher level of engagement from employees (Chathoth et al., 2020). Hence, it is important to analyse if employees in different types of hotels have different levels of engagement. In addition, while research has explored the role of technology in value co-creation in hotels (Lei et al., 2019; Cabiddu et al., 2013), more research is needed to understand the role of technology in value co-creation from the perspective of hotel employees.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study qualitatively explores hotel frontline employees' views of value co-creation in hotels, by considering the motivations and roles of consumers and providers, and the outcomes of customer engagement in the value co-creation process. To achieve these objectives, data were collected from academic experts in the field of value co-creation in tourism and hospitality through an exploratory focus group and from hotel frontline employees through context interviews. Results from these two datasets were compared to find out to what extent hotel employees' views diverged or converged with those of experts.

### 3.1. DATA COLLECTION

#### 3.1.1. Exploratory focus group

Focus groups are group-based interviews that serve the purpose of collecting a range of opinions and perspectives on a topic area (Winlow et al., 2013). They are widely used in marketing and social sciences to collect opinion-based data. This research used non-probability purposeful sampling to select focus group participants. In non-probability purposeful sampling, the researcher selects the most productive sample to answer the research question based on their shared experience on a particular research topic (Lucas, 2014; Winlow et al., 2013). Hence, only academic experts on the theory of value co-creation and hospitality industry were selected. Wibeck et al. (2007) suggest a small group of five participants for focus group discussion to allow each participant to play a prominent role, while Winlow et al. (2013) advise to keep the group size between 5 to 12. Considering these suggestions, we selected a group of five academic experts in co-creation in tourism (Table 1). The discussion was conducted online using Zoom due to the social distancing mandates imposed due to Covid-19 prevention. The discussion was video recorded with consent of the participants for transcription and analysis purpose. In data analysis, we refer to these research participants as FGP ("focus group participants").

**Table 1**

*Exploratory focus group participants*

|         | Gender | Designation         | Expertise                                   |
|---------|--------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| FGP1    | Female | Associate professor | Tourism management and planning             |
| FGP2    | Male   | Professor           | Economics and management                    |
| FGP3    | Female | Assistant professor | Tourism management and planning             |
| FGP4    | Female | Assistant professor | Tourism and development research            |
| FGP5    | Male   | Associate professor | Economics, tourism, sustainable development |

*Source:* own elaboration.

#### 3.1.2. Semi-structured context interviews

Interviews are used to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings, as well as to understand the meaning of participants' experiences (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Previous studies also used interviews to study co-creation in the hotel industry (Cabiddu et al., 2013; Harkison, 2018; Shaw et al., 2011). We explored how hotel frontline employees view the process of value co-creation, including motivations of actors and their roles in the co-creation of experiences, as well as outcomes of the value co-creation process. We intended to gain information as to what extent hotel employees view the value co-creation process differently from experts in value co-creation. Some of the advantages of using qualitative interviews are greater depth of insights into the problem; suitability for sensitive data; easiness to arrange and compare answers; the possibility of asking complex and follow up questions; and confidentiality (Hussey & Hussey, 1997; Malhotra & Birks, 2007). However, this method has some disadvantages which include consumption of time; problems in recording answers and analysing data; interviewer effect; gender and race biases; etc. We made every effort to minimize these shortcomings and find valid, reliable, in-depth information. This research study employed one-to-one online interviews using Zoom with hotel employees in Portugal.

A non-probability snowball sampling method was applied to select subjects for interviews. In snowball sampling, existing research participants help recruit further participants from among their acquaintances (Lucas, 2014). This sampling method was particularly useful to overcome the obstacles created by Covid-19 in terms of recruiting participants. We initially recruited interviewees working in the hotel industry and later asked for referrals to find more subjects to interview. Twelve context interviews with hotel employees were conducted using semi-structured questions to collect qualitative data (Table 2). All the interviews were video recorded with the consent of participants and completely transcribed. In data analysis, we refer to these research participants as HE ("hotel employees").

**Table 2**
*Hotel employees interviewed*

|  | Gender | Designation | Accommodation Type |
|---|---|---|---|
| HE 1 | Male | Receptionist | Boutique hotel |
| HE 2 | Male | Breakfast Manager | Boutique hotel |
| HE 3 | Male | Receptionist | Boutique hotel |
| HE 4 | Male | Receptionist | 5-star hotel |
| HE 5 | Male | Receptionist | 5-star hotel |
| HE 6 | Female | Receptionist | Luxury hotel |
| HE 7 | Female | General manager | Hotel and resort |
| HE 8 | Female | Receptionist | Club Lounge |
| HE 9 | Female | Receptionist | Design and country hotel |
| HE 10 | Female | Receptionist | 5-star hotel |
| HE 11 | Male | Restaurant waiter | 3-star hotel |
| HE 12 | Male | Restaurant waiter | 3-star hotel |

*Source:* own elaboration

### 3.2. DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative data analysis followed the six-step thematic analysis process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): i) familiarising with data; ii) generating initial codes; iii) searching for themes; iv) reviewing themes; v) defining and naming themes; vi) producing the report.

Data analysis was conducted through a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) due to its usefulness for analysing a large amount of data conveniently and efficiently (Bringer et al., 2004; Harkison, 2018). Considering these advantages, NVivo 12 was used for coding and analysis purpose. Nine main themes and 31 subthemes were identified through the coding process, resulting in a thematic map (Table 3).

This paper concentrated only on the themes related to the research question. Finally, the themes were analysed, selecting crucial extracts and examples, and relating the findings with the research questions and previous research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Table 3**
*Identified themes and sub-themes*

| Main themes | Number of sub themes |
|---|---|
| Providers' roles in value co-creation | 5 |
| Customer roles in value co-creation | 4 |
| Employees and guest interaction/co-creation process | 4 |
| Guests' motivating factors | 4 |
| Improvement of experience | 2 |
| Guests' satisfaction and emotion | 2 |
| Guest engagement | 5 |
| Evidence of networked co-creation | 0 |
| Impact on hotel performance | 5 |

*Source:* own elaboration

## 4. RESULTS

In this section the findings of thematic analysis are presented.

### 4.1. MOTIVATIONS AND ROLES IN THE VALUE CO-CREATION PROCESS

#### 4.1.1. Providers' motivations

According to FGP, the bottom line of hotels' survival nowadays is not only to co-create a better experience but also to co-create an experience that exceeds the guest's expectations. Interactive value co-creation enhances experience, which contributes to enhance guest satisfaction.

HE share similar views concerning providers' motivations. However, they give more prominence to the interaction staff have with guests. Many HE underlined that interactions are ultimately what guests remember: the attention received, and the connection established with employees, not the property itself. The motivation is to welcome guests:

*Positive interactions create better experience for guests because it's almost impossible to be in a hotel without having contact with the employees. That is why it's so important for employees to do a good job in interacting with the guests (HE6).*

These interactions also set a perception in the guests' mind about the standard of the service they are going to receive through their stay, as stated by the HE.

According to HE, what motivates hotels to engage in co-creation is to generate positive emotion and satisfaction among guests, since this brings positive economic outcomes and strategic advantages for hotels. Co-creation allows hotels to customise their services for guests and thus provide enhanced experiences which leave guests satisfied. Hotels expect that satisfied customers engage more with the hotel, e.g., by repeating visits, purchasing more, becoming loyal, spreading positive word-of-mouth, which brings strategic advantages:

*Because they are trying to make sure that the guests are returning. That is the main goal of every single hotel. (HE6)*

Both HE and FGP pointed out that a lack of interaction or negative interactions (online or offline) can bring dissatisfaction. Hence, hotels are motivated to provide positive experiences and avoid negative ones, which can lead to negative marketing and value co-destruction (Plé & Chumpitaz-Cáceres, 2010):

*If the employees are nice and polite to the guests, it is more likely that the guests will be happy and will return and they will say nice things about our hotel. But if we treat the clients with disrespect, you can be sure that they will tell the world we did it (HE6).*

Although both HE and FGP shared similar views in relation to providers' motivations, HE were more likely to underline the importance of staff in achieving the providers' goal of welcoming guests and keeping them satisfied.

### 4.1.2. Providers' roles

Both FGP and HE outlined a range of roles hotels play in the co-creation process. These include making value propositions to initiate interactions, facilitating and maintaining interactions, identifying guests' needs and wants, maintaining a favourable organisational culture for engagement to occur, recruiting skilled employees, and providing further training, offering personalised service based on guests' available information, and avoiding value co-destruction.

All FGP outlined that hotels should facilitate and maintain interactions with hotel guests all along the co-creation process. Hotels should act as value facilitators and take the responsibility to create the necessary platforms and conditions to facilitate this bi-directional communication:

*Always, you need to stay connected with your customers to create and maintain co-creation opportunities. It is necessary to continue co-creation processes with customers (FGP5).*

This interaction process should encourage guests to share information, thus stimulating their role as value creators in the value co-creation process (see section Consumer roles).

Additionally, for FGP, hotel owners, managers and employees should interact with guests daily to find out how their stay is going, and if there are any issues to resolve. Most FGP agreed that almost all the hotels make the same mistake of not monitoring guest satisfaction during their stay, and only assessing satisfaction at check-out. According to these experts, this is too late. They also suggested maintaining follow-up communication with the guests once they leave the hotel to maintain the co-creation relationship.

Although HE also agreed that their hotels facilitate interaction and engagement, there were mixed responses concerning the extent and systematic nature of these interactions. In fact, most HE revealed a lack of systematic effort from management and employees to enhance the kind of interactions and engagement required for value co-creation. When asked if he performs any activities to enhance customer engagement and interactions, one HE replied:

*Well, I would have to say no. We are a small unit. (HE1).*

Another HE provided the following answer when asked whether she interacts with guests daily:

*It depends, like sometimes if it is like a top guest, we would call them[sic] in the room and ask if everything is OK with their stay. If not, normally no, just if they pass by the reception, we ask them [sic] (HE8).*

From these comments, it is possible to observe that, although there are some efforts to interact with guests, these are not systematic. Therefore, it can be said that although there are some scattered forms of value co-creation, they are not systematically organised by management.

However, a minority of HE responded that their hotels managers provide clear guidance on daily interactions with guests. All these interviewees enjoyed establishing such interactions:

*This is the management guidance that the more you engage with your guests the better for us to get to know how the guests are getting on with the service and let us know if anything goes wrong, then we can fix it (HE11).*

*I do interact with guests a lot. I try to give them some advice, find out what they are going to do in the following days, make them enjoy the stay always (HE2).*

*Yes, normally a lot, it's normal for me, when I see them, I always ask if they like their rooms. Are they going to visit something? Do they have any plans? Do they want any help to book something? I always ask if they want any help with anything (HE10).*

Some HE responded that they interact with guests when they pass by the reception or go for breakfast in the morning. Some other reported that their managers interact with guests daily to find how their stay is going, and if there is any issue to resolve. This kind of interactions and initiatives are consistent with the kind of interactions required for the co-creation of value. Therefore, some of the hotels studied are indeed stimulating customer engagement and systematic value co-creation. However, these hotels are largely high-end 4-star and 5-star hotels.

Hotels also play the role of identifying guests' needs and wants. For FGP, identifying needs and wants is crucial in the quest of achieving value co-creation:

*Identifying the needs of customers is a very important issue. This is the basis of the co-creation process. Adapting appropriate strategies to design the process to deliver the service in an appropriate way is also important (FGP3)*

According to FGP, the availability of online communication tools has improved communication and the possibility to identify needs and wants to better prepare and customise experiences for guests before they arrive.

HE's responses were mixed. Some responded that they indeed collect information about guests' needs and wants to prepare better experiences. They stated that hotel managers provide them with instructions to get information from guests:

*Our management instructed [sic] more engagement and interactions with the customers so that we get to know their expectations and can prepare accordingly (HE11).*

Mostly HE from 4-star and 5-star hotels responded that they personalise the service for their guests:

*If it is a family, if they have a baby, if they are an elderly couple, it's always different. So, we must personalize (HE10).*

This personalisation also included boat tours, mountain tours, celebrations for marriage anniversary, marriage proposal, birthday party etc. However, not all hotels focused on identifying guests' needs and wants in order to customise experiences, according to HE.

Another important role played by hotels in the co-creation process is that of avoiding value co-destruction. Due to social media and online booking platforms, negative experiences can be disseminated very quickly, which can damage reputation. Hence, hotel employees play an important role in avoiding value co-destruction by listening to customers' needs, dealing with dissatisfied customers, and recovering service, as highlighted by several HE:

*Nowadays it's super important to pay attention to those booking sites. Because a lot of guests complain there. If you answer really politely like 'I'm so sorry that happened to you', the customer and everybody else will see it, that you responded him, you cared them [sic] and that is very, very important. I think every hotel needs to have at least one person to make sure that everything is answered on the internet (HE6).*

Finally, hotels' management of organisational culture and employee skills plays a role in value co-creation. According to FGP, these aspects are crucial for achieving co-creation:

> *It has a lot to do with the philosophy of the companies, and also with the way of thinking of management and even the technologies used (FGP1).*

FGP emphasised that, given the role of employees in creating better experiences for guests, it is crucial for hotels to employ skilled individuals and train them, so that they can interact with guests adequately. Another FGP outlined the importance of internal communication to achieve co-creation and improve guests' experience. Otherwise, information does not flow from one department to another, making it difficult to provide good service or resolve any issue. HE shared similar views. They highlighted the importance of organisational culture and employee skills in managing interactions to improve the co-creation of memorable experiences for guests.

To sum up, while FGP and HE shared similar views in relation to providers' roles in value co-creation, FGP emphasized the importance of monitoring guests' satisfaction during their stay and maintaining follow-up communication after they leave. However, HE's discourses revealed a lack of systematic effort to maintain interaction with guests in most hotels. There is also evidence of lack of focus on identifying customers' wants and needs. Moreover, while FGP valued platforms to maintain bi-directional communications with guests, HE did not refer to them.

### 4.1.3. Consumer motivations

For FGP, what motivates guests to participate in the value co-creation process is obtaining value and an enhanced experience. They added that the recognition of guests' contribution to value co-creation is important to motivating them to participate in interaction, and that trust in the business is crucial for guests' willingness to share information. While FGP focused mainly on enhanced experience and value as the main reasons for customers' participation in value co-creation, HE more so emphasized emotional factors:

> *If they see any interesting things, they would be very enthusiastic to come and share. But it also works the other way around, like many guests would want to share their bad experience as well (HE1).*

HE reported that guests share their experience mostly out of emotion and no reward is needed to encourage them to engage them in these interactions:

> *They share their own information out of emotion, and that is not for reward purpose. Because, they are in a new place, most tourists are from different parts of the world. So, they are always interested in sharing things with us. I think reward is not very effective in this case (HE10).*
>
> *I think that the main dominating factor is emotional. I believe so, I believe that this is the thing that motivates them to engage in interaction (HE3).*

However, a few HE believed that some sort of reward can be effective to motivate guests to engage in co-creation:

> *Yes, for example, a bar or other departments, of course, can offer [sic] some rewards. For example, if we offer swimming pool or gymnasium, we know many times about the personal experiences of guests while using those facilities for free or at discounted price could increase interaction (HE1).*

Hence, the main difference concerning HE and FGP's understanding of consumers' motivations is that while the former focused almost exclusively on emotional factors, the latter also considered the importance of recognizing guests' contributions and rewards.

### 4.1.4. Consumer roles

According to FGP and HE, consumers' main role in the co-creation process is co-creating value for themselves. They share feedback, suggestions, and information about their needs by using the available channels and interaction opportunities at hotels. This enables the co-creation of a better experience. While FGP emphasized slightly more the role of interactive technologies in enabling information sharing, HE emphasized more their own role in proactively enabling guests' role as value creators, by seeking face-to-face interaction with them.

Hence, FGP mostly stressed the role of modern interactive technology in facilitating the provision of feedback and suggestions to hotels. Guests create value through direct feedback, social media, and various kinds of booking platforms. This feedback and suggestions can turn into fresh innovation – hence, they also play the role of co-innovators:

> *I think, customers contribute significantly by providing opinions and ideas [that] can turn into fresh innovative business concepts helping designing products and services (FGP4).*

HE highlighted comparatively more how customers are value creators in face-to-face contexts. They stated that hotel guests approach employees and inform them if they really enjoy their experience in the hotel or if something needs to be improved – thus engaging in service co-recovery:

> *If something positive, negative, what they liked, what they didn't like, what they found strange, what they found amusing, what they found odds, you know, they always share with us (HE3).*

HE also pointed out how they proactively seek to obtain guests' feedback, and thus stimulate guests' role as value creators:

> *When we ask guests about how their stay is going and what are they planning to do in the city, they like that special attention and get involved in interaction (HE8).*

However, some HE reported that not all guests are interested in engaging and sharing information about their experience. While leisure tourists are usually interested in engaging and sharing their experience with hotel employees, this is frequently not the case with business tourists, who are largely busy and prefer to spend time in the room.

To sum up, the main difference between FGP's and HE's accounts is that FGP placed much more emphasis on the importance of interactive technology to enable customers' participation in value co-creation, whereas HE, once again, were much more likely to highlight their own role in face-to-face interaction. Moreover, HE mentioned an additional aspect not pointed out by FGP: leisure tourists' greater likelihood to share their experiences with staff, as compared to business tourists' preference for less interaction.

### 4.2. OUTCOMES OF VALUE CO-CREATION

For both HE and FGP, enhancing experience is the prime motive for guests to get involved in interactions with hotels. Improvement of experience leads to satisfaction and positive emotion towards hotels, and even towards the destinations:

> *I think overall what customers want to get from all of this is to have an enhanced experience. Of course, it will impact satisfaction (FGP4).*

Satisfaction and positive emotion bring strategic advantages for hotels:

> *If the clients meet good friendly employees, have good friendly interactions with the employees, then both benefit from it. The clients will feel happy and satisfied. So, they will come back and recommend other people to visit the hotel (HE5).*

Firstly, according to HE and FGP, positive emotion and satisfaction lead to a higher level of customer engagement in spreading positive word-of-mouth, particularly when hotels can fulfil guests' specific needs. This includes not only recommendations to friends and family, but also positive electronic word-of-mouth, which enhances the hotels' reputation, image, and trustworthiness. In turn, this may attract more guests to the hotel, thus having positive economic outcomes:

> *Enhanced interactions have improved our reputation especially through the word-of-mouth. When your [sic] reputation goes up, it has an obvious impact on your financial performance (HE11).*
>
> *Better interactions enhance guests' experience which they share with their family, friends, relatives so on. This can increase our receipts and improve our financial reward, financial performance (HE12).*
>
> *A good experience leads to satisfaction and can lead to positive word-of-mouth and recommendations to others and can lead to, of course, more customers to the hotels (FGP4).*

Moreover, positive word-of-mouth can reduce marketing costs for hotels, for example, when guests share positive experiences on online platforms or social media. The enhanced experience may also allow hotels to charge a premium price. In addition, both HE and FGP highlighted that the enhancement of experience through co-creation may increase consumption of further services by guests during their stay, since they are enjoying their experience, thus increasing hotel revenues:

> *When the guests are having good time in the hotel, they may purchase other services. So, probably they will go to the spa, if the hotel has one, or get a drink or something like that (FGP4).*
>
> *When people like our food, our kitchen, our environment, they are going to spend more money. Because, we have this spa, health club, swimming pool and normally when they like, they are going to spend a lot in these departments (HE7).*

Furthermore, both FGP and HE agreed that better satisfaction and positive emotion lead to repeated visits. When a guest is satisfied and has positive emotions for a hotel brand, they not only return to the same hotel but also choose the same brand in other cities:

> *If they're happy, they come back as well, and we have some guests that come two and three times in a year (HE9).*

Finally, the strategic advantages that hotels can obtain in the value co-creation process are not only a result of the guests' engagement due to their satisfaction with their enhanced experiences. During the value co-creation process, customers also share feedback and knowledge, which, as previously analysed, can lead to innovative product and service design. This is a key strategic advantage for hotels. Although both HE and FGP mentioned this aspect, FGP emphasised it even more. This was the only difference found between HE and FGP concerning outcomes of value co-creation.

## 5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study seeks to answer the following research question: *how do hotel frontline employees view the value co-creation process in their hotels?* Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of co-creation in hotels from the perspective of employees.

Three specific objectives were defined to address the research question: i) to identify providers' and consumers' motivations and roles in value co-creation, according to hotel frontline employees; ii) to identify the outcomes of value co-creation, according to hotel frontline employees; and iii) to understand to what extent hotel frontline employees view the co-creation process differently from experts on co-creation.
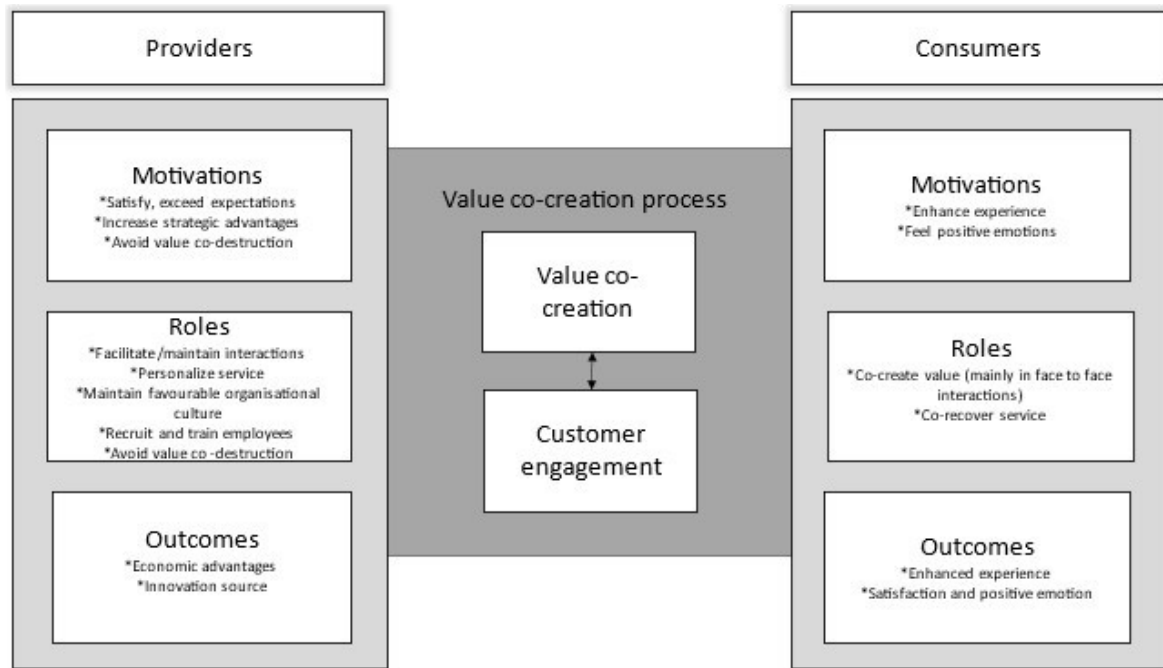
***Figure 1.*** Framework of value co-creation from the employees' point of view
***Source:*** own elaboration

Our first objective was to identify providers' and consumers' motivations and roles in value co-creation, according to hotel frontline employees. According to HE, hotel providers participate in value co-creation motivated by the desire to satisfy and exceed expectations, avoid value co-destruction, and increase their own strategic advantages. These results are in line not only with FGP's account, but also with previous studies (Wu et al., 2017). In fact, increasing guest satisfaction is crucial for obtaining economic outcomes and strategic advantages that allow for survival in a competitive environment.

Grönroos (2008) states that the role of providers is, as value facilitators, to provide customers with a foundation for value creation in the form of resources. Payne et al. (2008) argue that providers should develop co-creation opportunities with customers, implement customer solutions, and manage customer encounters. The findings of this research corroborate these arguments. FGP suggested that hotels should facilitate continuous communication for an effective value co-creation process. Although both FGP and HE referred to the importance of staff-guest interaction, HE gave even more importance to it – which is most likely the result of employees emphasising the importance of their own work. They also pointed out the importance of maintaining a favourable organisational culture, recruiting skilled employees, and providing further training. In fact, organisational factors have been considered critical for employee engagement in value co-creation (Chathoth et al., 2022).

Harkison's (2018) empirical research on the New Zealand hotel industry found that hotel general managers attempt to make an appearance during check-in and check-out to interact and engage with customers to facilitate customer participation and create a great experience for themselves. Some of the HE in this research responded that their hotel managers provide clear guidance on daily interaction with guests. The employees of these hotels reported that they meet and greet with the guests in the restaurants during breakfast times, in the bars, when they pass by receptions, and other premisses. Based on this, it can be said that a minority of the hotels are indeed practicing systematic value co-creation process. These hotels are largely high end 4-star

and 5-star hotels. However, the interview data suggests that most hotels lack systematic efforts to enhance the kind of communication and interactions required for value co-creation. Most middle and lower-level hotels only have scattered forms of interaction, and these are not systematically organised by management. These findings are in line with Chathoth et al. (2020), who pointed out that there is more employee engagement in upscale hotels. Moreover, larger hotels, especially if integrated in chains, may have more resources to invest in the enhancement of employee skills (Nguyen et al., 2021; Pikkemaat & Peters, 2006). Harkison (2018) also demonstrated that co-creation was happening in all luxury accommodations in New Zealand under study.

Pera et al. (2016) maintained that, for customers, the motivating factors to participating in value co-creation is driven by reputation enhancement, experimentation, and relationship motives. Similarly, Füller (2010) argued that consumers' motivation to participate in co-creation can be dominated by intrinsic factors, such as fun and enjoyment of creativity. For Wu et al. (2017) self-enhancement and economic rewards are the two major concrete motivating factors for customers to engage in value co-creation activities. For FGP, the key motivating factor for guests to participate in interactions is the desire for enhanced experiences and obtaining rewards. This is in line with the studies previously mentioned. However, the interviews with HE revealed that, from their perspective, customers' main motivational factor for participation in value co-creation and interaction with staff is emotional. In Chathoth et al. (2020), employees also believed that informal conversations that helped staff and guests to connect at a deeper level were crucial for value co-creation. Huang and Lin (2020) also underlined the importance of emotions in value co-creation.

Grönroos (2008) suggests that the role of customers is to interact and integrate the provider's resources to co-create value. Similarly, Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer (2012) argue that customers can be considered as partial employees when they take the role of prosumers who undertake value creating activities to co-create their consumption experiences. According to our findings, the main role of customers is that of value co-creators. However, customers also play a role in co-recovery when sharing what could be improved. While FGP mentioned the importance of technologies in stimulating value co-creation, HE mostly highlighted the role of guests as value co-creators in face-to-face contexts. Frontline employees in Chathoth et al. (2020) also valued physical personal interaction over technological interfaces, which were seen as an obstacle to high-quality interactions. According to HE, although most of the hotel guests are keen to interact and share their experience with hotel employees, there are some exceptions. HE mentioned that business travellers are less interested in engaging and in sharing experiences, as also reported by Chathoth et al. (2020).

The second objective of this study was to identify the outcomes of value co-creation, according to hotel frontline employees. Pansari and Kumar (2017) argue that co-created customer experiences affect the level of satisfaction and emotion toward the company. Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer's (2012) quantitative research found that the degree of interactive co-creation positively affects customer satisfaction, loyalty, and service expenditures. In the interviews, all the HE agreed that interactions enhance guests co-created experience which in turn enhance guest satisfaction and emotion. Their answers are in line with those of FGP. Huang et al. (2019) empirical research finds that good experiences create positive emotions, high memorability, loyalty, and word-of-mouth advertising. This finding suggests that hotels need to be very careful in managing interactions to avoid negative emotions and create positive ones.

Pansari and Kumar (2017) assert that it is accepted by practitioners and academics that customer satisfaction results in customer behaviour patterns that positively affect company performance.

For them, customer satisfaction is perceived to lead to repeat purchases and positive emotions. It also leads to indirect contributions to the firm in the form of customer referral, influence, and knowledge toward the firm. In our study, HE recognised that satisfaction and positive emotion encourage greater customer engagement such as positive word-of-mouth (online and offline), repeat purchases, and increased consumption. Pansari and Kumar (2017) argue that word-of-mouth in social media creates a chain reaction across a wide group of customers and indirectly impacts the firm's profits. Hence, customer engagement may reduce marketing costs.

Hotels can also use customer feedback and suggestions to produce fresh innovations as guests can play the role of co-innovators (Shaw et al., 2011). For FGP, customer feedback and knowledge sharing can lead to innovative product and service design. However, this outcome of value co-creation was practically not mentioned by HE. This may be a result of lack of awareness of all the benefits that can be derived from value co-creation. Therefore, improved training is needed to raise employees' awareness about all the benefits of value co-creation.

Finally, our third objective was to understand to what extent hotel frontline employees view the co-creation process differently from experts on co-creation. We have already mentioned how HE's views differed from those of FGP while discussing the first two objectives. To sum up, HE views were to a great extent similar to those of FGP. However, HE valued more their own role in the value co-creation process and mentioned less the importance of platforms and technology to enable guests' participation in value co-creation. They were also less likely to refer to guests' feedback as a potential source of innovation for hotels, as underlined by Shaw et al. (2011). Hence, employees were not fully aware of all the benefits that can be obtained in the value-co creation process. While FGP underlined the importance of systematic efforts to maintain communication with guests throughout their stay and customise their experience, HE employed in lower and middle range hotels were not aware of this, which reveals lack of guidance by management. Without clear management initiatives, it is very difficult to achieve the systematic guest engagement needed for value co-creation (Harkison, 2018).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study explored employees' views of the value co-creation process in hotels. The motivations and roles of consumers and providers were considered, as well as the outcomes of the value co-creation process. In general, employees' (HE) views are aligned with experts' (FGP) views. However, HE views reveal a lack of awareness of all the benefits that can be derived from co-creation, namely at the innovation level and due to the use of technological interfaces. This lack of awareness is likely to be explained by a lack of systematic effort at the managerial level to guide employees on how to engage in value co-creation and customise experiences. This lack of guidance is also observed in relation to the maintenance of communication with guests throughout their stay. Although an overwhelming consensus was found among FGP about the importance of continuous interactions with guests to co-create better experience, only employees from high-end 4-start and 5-star hotel reported this kind of systematic interactions whereas employees from low-end hotels only reported scattered interactions which are not conducive to organised value co-creation process. Without clear management initiatives, it is very difficult to achieve this kind of systematic guest engagement.

These research findings contribute to the theory of co-creation in the hotel context. They highlight the importance of analysing the perspectives of employees on value co-creation, with a focus on both antecedents and outcomes of value co-creation. The analysis of the gap between employees' views of real co-creation processes and the ideal co-creation process as described

by experts suggests challenges that need to be overcome to boost employee engagement in value co-creation.

Our findings have managerial implications. A systematic effort to engage customers in value co-creation is needed. Hotel managers should provide clear guidance and instructions to employees on how, when, and how frequently to interact with guests. They also need to engage employees in the generation of knowledge about guests' needs and preferences. It is essential not only to gather information on customer expectations prior to their arrival, but also to continuously assess satisfaction during their stay, and to establish follow-up strategies in order to enhance value co-creation, build long-term customer satisfaction, improve recommendation intentions, and provide a reputable hotel image. This implies not only the provision of training but also the improvement of internal communication. In particular, improving horizontal communication among frontline employees may facilitate information sharing (Barnes et al., 2020). Like Barnes et al. (2020), we do not advocate that employees learn and follow standardized scripts, but rather that they learn the full benefits of value co-creation and develop the skills to understand the needs and emotions of customers and act on these. Finally, it is important to consider that not all tourists have the same willingness to interact with employees. Both our findings and previous studies' findings (e.g., Chathoth et al., 2020) revealed that the business tourist may prefer lower levels of interaction. Hence, companies should adopt differentiated approaches to employee-tourist encounters according to segments, as proposed by Barnes et al. (2020).

The qualitative nature of this study and its small sample size limit its generalizability and usability in different contexts. Therefore, quantitative research to test the association among various antecedents and consequences of co-creation could significantly contribute to theory development. Conducting research on a larger sample including hotel customers could enhance the validity and reliability of findings.

Finally, this research mainly concentrated on value co-creation practices in hotels for a single country. Conducting similar research in different cultural settings in different countries may improve the rigor of findings. Moreover, while academic experts considered that the key motivating factors for guests' involvement in interaction was a desire for enhanced experiences, hotel employees considered that guests' motivation was emotional. Future studies could analyse this topic in greater depth.

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MI: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft; IC: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – review & editing; SL: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation

**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

There are no conflicts of interest to declare

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