

Flixbus – What's the Conversation?
Co-Creating Budget Travel

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ABSTRACT

The way in which travel is experienced and valued has changed drastically in the past decade. With the growing presence of online platforms, ease of booking systems and an abundance of information, the user is in more control and more involved in the process than ever before. It is no longer a one-way process from the travel service providers to curate the experience, but the customer desires an authentic, individualistic yet reflective of intrinsic desires such as escapism and relaxation to be reflected in their purchase. Social media plays a significant role as a central hub of distribution, information and engagement with customers for travel brands. This exploratory research assesses fundamental values and societal shifts which have given growth to the collaborative economy and the prosumer to assess the changes in travel and tourism and how the branding of a service should encompass these changes. By using Flixbus as a case study, an assessment of social media content creation and the perceptions of individuals can be framed by combining interviews and a thematic content analysis. The main findings suggest that social media plays a significant role in travel consumption experience of the individual. The act of tourism itself has become a form of travel brand co-creation and social media facilitates this interaction between the brand and the 'prosumer'. There is a constant media presence from the planning to the experience phase of a travel experience, with services welcoming user generated content more than ever.

KEYWORDS: *Travel, Low-cost, Tourism, Co-Creation, Social Media*

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1. Introduction

The customer nowadays has an increasingly important role in a position that was mostly inaccessible in the travel and tourism context previously. Companies and services are no longer just telling the consumer what they want, but they are tuning in to what the consumers share, discuss and are seeking for the companies to provide. Furthermore, the inherent values of the individual are further shaped by ever-shifting societal trends as well as the influence of social media on the understanding and valuation of the self. The boundaries between sharing, collaborating and consuming are blurring. Therefore, research should be able to observe how co-creating and producing consumers collaborate between one another and with businesses.

Travelling in 2019 is not necessarily the grand adventure of a lifetime that it was a century or even a decade ago. Especially in the developed western world, travel is often a routine practice for much of the population. For context, in 2017, 62% of European Union residents made at least one personal trip (Eurostat, 2018). Various societal and technological developments induce changes in the way that travel is now perceived. Air travel was once deemed as the epitome of glamour by Pan American World Airways (Pan Am) between the 1960s and 1970s. The goal was to make the traveller feel pampered and that the journey signified something unique, rather than the transition from point A to point B. Modern travel no longer pampers the passenger, but it is also evident that the population simply no longer value this aspect of being pampered (Phang, 2013). Those that do, can pay for luxury travel accordingly. However, for many travellers, authenticity is highly essential (Obeneur, 2004). The search for authenticity and unique experiences has resulted in the traveller becoming more involved in the planning process and the desire to know first-hand how others have experienced their journeys and to have something to demonstrate their own experiences (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Obeneur, 2004). This search has shifted from physical sources of information to online, to social medias and therefore there is an abundance on images, stories, reviews and videos on travel experiences.

The fundamental changes in socio-economic values, the collaborative economy or experience sharing affect the way that travel and tourism is now perceived and which type of experiences and values the customer desires when planning their holiday. The combination of these factors has resulted in new businesses, new branding practices, as well as new consumer behaviour. Customers are differentiated by their needs and wants more than ever, and with the availability of easy to access budget travel, there is a more significant tendency to opt for mini breaks than a traditional long vacation (Tetlow, 2017). The consumer behaviour is also evident on social media platforms – the sharing of Instagram ‘stories’ and posts, whilst creating a very specific narrative of the self for others to see.

Based on the changes in the way travel is both valued and approached by the industry and the consumers, the perception of the experiences are often already formed before the product or service is used. For instance, in the case of travel experiences, the individual already expects an element of social interaction, personalisation and to explore, rather than to mark off the conventional tourist 'to-do list' (Phang, 2013). From the industry perspective, these customer "experience" expectations, therefore, require a clear understanding of desires and the adaptation of social changes. The industry can only mediate the intrinsic desires of the individual, but the brand alone cannot create or dictate these values for the individual. Reflecting on these desires leads to a heavy focus on visualizing travel motivations – the attraction of the destination versus the internal motives of the consumer. It is important for travel to capture elements of both, but it should feel natural to the consumer.

Social media plays an important role in the majority of the everyday habits of the consumer. In 2019, there are 3.5 billion active social media users and 3.3 billion mobile social media users (Kemp, 2019). This means that approximately 45% of the global population is active on some form of social media. Considering this, the existing research on the motivations of users' social media usage makes use of the modernised understanding of 'uses and gratification theory' (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Whiting & Williams, 2013). The goal of the theory is to identify what individuals seek out on social media and why or how this fulfils specific needs, thus leading to ultimate gratification. Whiting and Williams (2013) argue that by understanding the needs of the individual, businesses can leverage these desires from their audiences on social media. Social media is the source of new communities which facilitate consumer and prosumer information exchange, and this influences the shaping services and products (Niezgoda, 2013). However, as already argued, the implications of this extensive information and ease of communication for the company is that they may reach a point where the prosumers are no longer in line with the company's own interests and values. As a result, organisations need to find a balance between social media engagement and the encouragement of consumer communities as well as establishing firm boundaries that ensure the integrity of the service.

Services and brands which are proactive on social media platforms have a unique opportunity to place the customer in the active role of their travel experience from beginning to end. Co-creation is the combined result of proactive customers and their desire for unique and authentic experiences as well as technologies and platforms. Technological developments and the rise of social media platforms has empowered users to connect with a wider network, to share more of their own experiences and values, to create content and to have access to more information than ever before (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Hays, Page & Buhalis; Leung, Law, Van Hoof & Buhalis,

2013). Content creation and especially co-creation has changed the way that travel, and holidays are considered, planned, and even experienced (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Phang, 2013). Some brands and services actively encourage users to co-create and to share. With this they must also accept that there will always be a community of users and their own created content, whether positive or negative and this will become a part of the brand or service's profile online (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Furthermore, there is an indication that consumers prefer the user-generated content (UGC) as it often conveys authenticity and trustworthiness (Sotiriadis & Van Zyl, 2013). Therefore, there has also been a shift in the way that companies use social media to influence consumer decisions but also attempt to convey transparency and to engage with the communities online (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Lee, Olson & Trimi, 2012). For travel, UGC and online communities have a substantial effect on the accessibility of travel and destinations. Within minutes, the average consumer can book a ticket across Europe with a few taps on their smartphone, without needing to plan their full itinerary or to check hotel availabilities beforehand. The prevalence of mobile platforms has thus turned the casual consumer into the expert of journey planning, fulfilling their desires for an exciting trip, motivated by carefully curated images on social media. This does not deny the potential of adventure and glamour in travel while the everyday context of the journey and planning has shifted.

The active role of the consumer, therefore, leads to faster processes, new business ventures and the prevalence of the collaborative economy. Collaborative travel entails shared mobility such as Uber or BlaBlaCar, shared city bicycles and scooters or shared accommodation such as Airbnb or CouchSurfing. These services are the natural evolution of customers wanting to co-create, to share, and to find value in shared, authentic experiences. The collaborative economy also gives a platform for increasingly critical social values such as sustainability, which includes green transportation but also the reduction of excess consumption practices. In the travel and tourism industry, these practices mostly are the result of economic gain – by taking a cheaper travel or accommodation alternative, the individual feels more inclined to travel and to develop the identity of the self through experiences given this new accessibility to travel. The effect of personal values, as argued by (Madrigal, 1995) suggests that the main motives are self-fulfilment and accomplishment, which guide the travel choice and activity choice.

Consumers as producers, especially through online platforms, provide for authenticity and uniqueness. Furthermore, customers are more likely to be interested in a product that can create a genuine emotional connection with its users. Tourism has always entailed a certain level of consumer production; creation of experiences, activities or interactions (Campos, Mendes, do Valle, & Scott, 2016). The consumer as a traveller is therefore an act of value co-creation in travel experiences. With the rise of social media and technological platforms and the ease of travel and

sharing, the performance of travel products is enhanced (McCabe, 2014; Tseng, Lung & Chiang, 2016). Whereas prosumption can be considered as more casual, active digital labour plays an active role in more profound meaning-making. The growth in casual travel, the availability of travel services and the wider connection of destinations has the customer involved more than ever before. Brands are sharing the development of the travel narrative with their customers, given the changed nature of travel behaviour. There is increased potential in creating positive societal shifts through collaborating and the casual introduction of long-term changes. Furthermore, there is deeper value to be obtained from casual but genuine user travel experiences. Grounding the excitement and luxury of travel in a casual, everyday context is normalised using social media and the involvement of the modern traveller.

1.1. Research Objectives and Relevance

In 2013, the first Flixbus logo emblazoned busses hit the roads of Munich. In 2015, the recognizable bright green logos could be seen all over Europe. Today, in 2019, Flixbus offers over 120,000 daily rides across Europe and is growing its presence in the United States. The intercity bus service originated from Munich, Germany and was established as a convenient travel alternative to the German rail and carpooling. The Flixbus business model is based on subcontracting a bus fleet in the different countries which operate the routes, and the company itself handles the planning, marketing and pricing. In the space of five years, Flixbus has grown exponentially and captured a market niche. By offering wireless internet, comfortable seating and an easy booking system via mobile platforms, it has successfully transformed an 'outdated' transportation method (Becker, 2017; Hold, 2017; Soloviev, 2015). Currently, Flixbus is one of the fastest growing and affordable services for inter-European travel. This shows that for Flixbus to remain close to its customer base, the brand must provide exactly that, which the customer desires. Although currently a relatively vague notion, this links to the idea that the customer is the driving force behind the Flixbus brand and its success. Flixbus emerged to cover the gap in the coach market in Europe. It quickly realized the customers were missing the ease of a platform to book or cancel their trips, the advantage of lower prices when booking early and the seamless transportation network that is now available to them. Behind the ease of access to the service, is also a whole social media and travel content spectrum.

This research therefore aims to investigate the position of Flixbus on the market, the audience it reaches, and the role of the Flixbus social media platforms in creating the Flixbus brand and experience. Specifically – what role does the customer play in the way that the Flixbus brand constructs itself or travel? What is the appeal of Flixbus over other budget alternative methods of

transport, especially in Europe? Based on these changes that have affected the travel and tourism industry and the importance of the user to feel involved in their travel process as a whole, this research explores the question of ***“To what extent does the consumer play a role in co-creating budget travel brands?”***. This research goal is explored from the perspectives of customer co-creation, ‘prosumption’ and ‘prosumerism’ (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), as well as the travel consumption experience of the individual.

As it currently stands, the extra costs required to justify the budget flight experience are beginning to outweigh the total satisfaction (Diaconu, 2012). Customers are now turning to Flixbus as an affordable, easy-access alternative and other competitors on the coach service market are rising (Meisenzahl, 2017). The research places itself in the context of the current social movement where spontaneity, affordability, and ease of using online platforms is prevalent (Petrini, Freitas & Silveira, 2017). Social sharing of experiences is more commonplace now than it was ten years ago (Dessart, Veloutsou & Morhon-Thomas, 2015; Leung, Law, Van Hoof & Buhalis, 2013; Smaliukiene, Chi-Shiun and Sizovaite, 2015). Obeneur (2003) investigated the importance that the individual imposes on their choices. The study found that this leads to specific expectations of experiences based on values such as self-development, self-understanding, personal relationships or acquiring knowledge. These values also contribute to the position of Flixbus on the market, especially in the customers' search for authenticity and to affirm the sense of self. What motivates the choice of Flixbus as opposed to the choice of air or rail travel when creating an individual travel experience? To understand the co-creation of budget travel brands and the online sharing of experiences, three sub-questions have been formulated to investigate the underlying elements of the main research objective considering the existing research on travel, co-creation, branding on social media and the role of the consumer in a digital consumption age:

Sub-question 1: What are the socio-economic values and trends that give budget travel services a market advantage?

Sub-question 2: What are the values, experiences and perceptions that the customer desires from their journey?

Sub-question 3: What are the travel motivations and desires that a travel service curates on social media to promote their service and organisation? How are the ‘pushes’ and ‘pulls’ that drive the customer’s decision-making process leveraged to entice budget travel?

The scientific relevance of this research comes from the lack of current studies on how transportation and budget travel companies accurately frame themselves on social media, and which customer values they use to shape their company image. The co-creation of travel, as it stands, is mostly focused on specific experiences, destinations, services or the purchase decision.

There is scope to observe the overall approach to travel and tourism from a social media branding perspective. The brand dynamic and well as marketing strategies on social media is rapidly changing and the necessary adaptations need exploration from a new angle. Besides, the travel context has changed from the feeling of 'once in a lifetime' experience to a frequent, expected and often spontaneous activity. Furthermore, as this is qualitative exploratory research into the customer travel experience specifically with Flixbus, it investigates an intriguing yet relatively unresearched company. The value of the travel experience is changing and therefore, both socially and scientifically it can serve as a guideline for evolving transportation and travel services. Socio-cultural expectations are changing, and thus a redefined understanding of how companies need to align themselves socially should be developed. Finally, the travel experience consumption is becoming increasingly social media oriented, be it from the perspective of the user or the service provider. Thus, it is essential to understand the step by step process of integrating the social media into the practice from beginning to end. This exploratory research makes use of mixed qualitative methods. In order to analyse the involvement of the customer, in-depth semi-structured interviews are used to address the personal values and views of travel. For assessing a travel brand's social media content and the presentation of travel concepts and values, Instagram and Facebook posts are analysed. By using a thematic analysis for assessment, the prevalent themes and patterns of the data can be observed to address the research questions.

Binkhorst and Dekker (2009) propose a research agenda for co-creation experiences in tourism. This research is based on the creation of value, given that technically, experiences are intangible and immaterial. Thus, creativity leads to self-development and a willingness to co-construct new values. This also entails a dynamic reorganisation of daily life – as experiences become increasingly commoditised, the solution is to co-create and increase the value of the individual (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009). The potential of the customers as designers leads to more interaction with companies. Given the social media opportunities nowadays for interaction, the individual can decide whether they personally receive added value from having initiated interaction with a company. Furthermore, companies benefit from reaching out to the customers and conducting market research based on the value, which is the result of customer co-creation. Tourism and travel are a unique context for individuals to co-create their individual narratives. Historically, the consumer sought out to buy the full experience with pre-determined value, whereas the next generation tourist wants to be in charge, with opinions framed by what has already been experienced.

This research proceeds with an overview of the theoretical concepts that guide the analysis. The main areas of focus are on the role of social media and how this facilitates word of mouth

marketing, the collaborative economy with a view of consumer activities such as co-creation, prosumption and digital labour. This is followed by creating a framework of the travel consumption experience and finally, existing research on Flixbus and budget travel. The following chapter presents the research design, data collection and analysis, followed by the presentation of the results and a discussion. Finally, there is a conclusion to summarise the main findings, the significance of this research and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is arranged from the overarching general concepts to the specifics to create a structured understanding of framing budget travel in the context of co-creation. First, the discussion of social media and communication practices is presented. Then, there is a discussion on the collaborative economy and the related concepts of co-creation, prosumption and digital labour. These concepts are considered from both the brand and the consumer perspective. Following this, there is a discussion of the socio-economic values and the travel consumption experience. This also includes an overview of travel motivations and the shaping of these via co-created and peer content. The final section of theory focuses on low cost travel as well as an overview of the current research on Flixbus.

2.1. Social Media

Social media has important effect on the consumer decision-making process (Hudson & Thal, 2013). Due to the availability of services and brands on social media, the consumer starts with a broad consideration group and then either adds or removes their options based on online findings. It is only after the purchase has been made that the consumer may choose to initiate a relationship with the brand and to share their experiences online. The authors present the four stages of decision making: (1) consideration, (2) evaluation, (3) purchase, (4) enjoyment and advocacy. The research here finds that the evaluation and enjoyment stages of a purchase and decision-making process are where social media carries the most relevance. However, for tourism marketers, the initial consideration stage of a decision is the most important – to attract the customers to the service, which is the direct result of successful marketing campaigns by the company or brand. The evaluation stage is no longer in control of the marketers; instead, it is the online sources of information and the growing customer to customer interaction, which can influence the outcome. Therefore, it is also necessary for the service provider, as argued, to foster a positive online brand community. In the tourism and travel context, there is evidence that it is crucial for providers to target different parts of the decision-making process on social media platforms. By providing the right tools to the (potential) consumers, the decision-making is made more accessible. Geo-location tags on social media platforms have been a hugely beneficial feature of travel-oriented services. With users tagging their location, there is specific UGC for destinations which provides more information and the differentiation of available experiences. Therefore, by having social media in the role of creating interest and motivating the choice, the customer is also close to other mobile and online platforms that enhance the speed at which they can purchase tickets. This is combined with

the fact that the social media pages of companies offer either an integrated booking system or have easily accessible links that take the customer to the purchase point.

2.1.1. Refining and Developing the Brand on Social Media

In addition to the prevalence of social media, there is notable development in the overall application and usage of social media by brands, both for customer outreach, the creation of brand communities as well as the decision-making process of the consumer (De Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Krallman, Pelletier & Adams, 2016). Research into the different social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat) indicates that although Facebook may be the 'biggest' social network, Twitter and Instagram are overtaking in terms of the purchase decision, especially for the younger demographic (Krallman, Pelletier and Adams, 2016). Marketers have previously lacked the understanding of social media for the importance of value creation, especially as the value generated differs from platform to platform. Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) argue that social media influences how travellers find, trust and create their travel information. Furthermore, social media influences customer service, marketing and promotions of Flixbus, therefore for a 'platform oriented' company, the social media presence and experience for a customer should be reliable and trustworthy, aligning the brand values with those of the customer (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

The increased online experience of potential guests requires a service provider to match customer needs and expectations. Therefore, social media plays an immensely important role in the management of customer relations (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). Furthermore, with a strong social media presence, a company can therefore also attract customers through focused and directed content, furthering the engagement through social interactions, and designing the pushes and pulls (Xu, Morgan, & Song, 2009) of their service. Another notable value of the use of social media for the consumption experience emerges through the opportunities it provides for the understanding and alignment with customer travel desires (Leung et al., 2013). Existing research into the practical use of social media for the travel consumption experience thus far has not explicitly explored transportation modes and instead focused on platforms such as TripAdvisor. However, given Flixbus' prominent social media presence with carefully curated content, the exploration of how this content aligns with customer interests, desires and considerations would provide for a more critical understanding the extent of the importance of this social media for a company.

Rokka and Canniford (2016) argue that social media plays a role in destabilising the brand online. According to the authors, the initial goal of brand design is that it should be established in a customer's mind and have lasting associations. This association and brand presence is generally

filtered through cultural intermediaries such as magazines, advertisements or social media. On social media, the significant components that are essential for communicating the brand are the narratives, mythologies and aesthetics, but there is also the necessary element of also reflecting customer gestures. Therefore, the authors argue that brands are contextualised with long term cultural shifts and coherent and recognisable forms stabilise them. There is evidence that there are particular meanings, qualities and practices that make this stabilisation possible, but the way social media is now used can affect the longevity of the values. For a transport or tourism service, the expressions must convey authenticity and legitimacy. The goal should not be to sell the product but to sell the accompanying historical, cultural and social values. The imagery on social media should then make use of consumers who contribute to alternative brand meanings on social media, so the brand does not frame its service but reflect the consumer who finds adventure and experience in the service. Another element of creating brand authenticity on social media entails the search for acceptance from the consumer base (Fournier & Avery, 2011). In the age of the social collective, the online participants have the most natural human desire to 'fit in', and therefore they are on the search for the online community which supports this. Tourism and travel trends shift according to social values as already argued, this therefore requires the services to realise that travel cannot be controlled, but instead carefully considered brand messages that invoke the desire to travel can be shaped. Fournier and Avery (2011) further argue that active listening is of utmost importance, and this should be aligned with consumer brand directives on social media. The power of differentiation is captured by the brand when there is high understanding of the social collective and matching the meaning or value that is desired. The same research from Fournier and Avery (2011) therefore suggests that by creating branded elements such as social rituals and cultural icons, the customers can be invited to the brand, rather than the brand waiting for an opportunity to find a fit. For travel activities, the mindset shift from luxury to authentic experiences and the desire for 'wanderlust' fulfilment is an ever evolving and therefore for travel brand embeddedness in the conversation and online world, differentiation but also capturing the collective values and support is essential.

A final element of understanding the role of social media in the travel experience is the specific effect of a platform on the perception and expectation of travel. It is suggested that UGC on Instagram has an impact on the users' perception of the content they are viewing. Specifically, in the case of destinations, it was observed that behavioural intentions could be strongly influenced pre-travel by UGC on Instagram, especially when it is promotional material (Shuqair & Cragg, 2017). It is common that Instagram images are specifically edited and curated to make them much more visually appealing than on other social media (Anderson, 2016), which is the source of caution for users. Furthermore, when framing tourist destinations, the users do not want to be misled when

creating their ideal itinerary based on visual posts. Hence the importance of UGC and co-created content from other users, avoiding bias from the source of the product or service (Shuqair & Cragg, 2017). The authors also argue that due to this scepticism of curated social media platforms, there has been a shift from customers as passive audiences to active participants. The participation shift occurs both online and offline and has already been discussed in the context of co-creation, digital labour and prosumerism. Based on this, when using Instagram for curating travel destinations images, the images should convey positive but accurate descriptions or activities. As users are more inclined to believe the UGC of peers and other travellers, visual images should also be 'real' when used on Instagram (Shuqair & Cragg, 2017).

2.1.2. Word of Mouth

When co-creating a brand online and offline, word of mouth (WOM) plays an essential role in creating awareness and creating customer involvement. By allowing the customers to create the 'conversation' about the brand through WOM, the relationship between brand and the customers creates a more honest relationship (Verhoef, Reinartz & Krafft, 2010). Lin and Lu (2010) explore the development of trust and the influence of purchase decisions through WOM. They concluded that the corporate image has a positive influence on trust, as well as commodity image and functional image. The importance of image is also tightly linked with the consumer purchase intention, especially when WOM is the linkage. For the assessment of word of mouth, it should be differentiated what the company claims from their service, what the customers themselves desire and which of this information is then translated to social media (Oetting, 2009). In addition, the relationships that the customers create between themselves is what leads to the added value of WOM for the company, if it leverages the prosumerist nature of its community (McCabe, 2014; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2012; Sotiriadis and Van Zyl, 2013).

The way online environments can foster innovations and encourage changes in the travel industry are multiple. Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (2013) investigate the importance of electronic WOM and the change that this enables in how consumers search for information and choose to co-create. As already argued, this also fosters an environment where the service is no longer in full control of the narrative or the experiences which customers share. Therefore, it is also more important than ever that the online environments become a two-way street for information exchange. Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (2013) suggest that services can benefit from this change by creating successful relationships with bloggers and other services. They can achieve this by using online platforms for facilitating customer engagement and developing the brand into a new era of WOM by shaping the new buying and decision framework. Based on this, it is still necessary to evaluate how much the

service or brand takes control of the online narrative, or whether they are actively engaging with the ever-changing needs of the customers and their process of information gathering and decision-making. Through e-WOM, there is the possibility to use a positive and passionate online community to attract new customers continuously and to introduce the service through the customers. As a result, co-creation and prosumerism are assessed in the context of social media platforms and their role in mediating purchase decisions.

Travellers' use of WOM is heavily embedded in the use of social media as a new information distribution channel (McCarthy, Stock & Verma, 2010). This changes how travellers determine their destinations, based on their peers' experiences. Brands as a result can use this WOM that is present to refine the brand and to create a connection with their customer base. The authors in their research found that WOM is especially important in leisure travel, where the primary planning sources are now social media platforms. When brands are proactive on social media and encouraging WOM from their customers, this sets new standards and expectations for the services. Therefore, it can be argued that social media combined with the effects of WOM can elevate how the brand is curated and interacts with the users. Social media is therefore an extension of the traditional sense of WOM, but it also plays a role in extending WOM as a part of co-creation practices. Finally, McCarthy, Stock and Verma (2010) found that co-creation can happen instantly through customer feedback or customer to customer WOM, which enables an 'always reactive' attitude from the brand. This results in a developing scope of social media in relation to how customers search for information, share their experiences and finally, their planning of the trip when selecting a service. Yoo, Sanders and Moon (2013) connect the participation in e-WOM to the different motives for the push and pull of travel behaviour. In this context, the authors determine that intrinsically customers consider themselves to be 'good' in nature and expect to reap the benefits for selfless behaviour. These same motivations for participation in e-WOM can be linked to the push and pull motivations for travel, and whether there is a match between the motivation to participate in e-WOM and which intrinsic or extrinsic travel values this participation reflects.

2.2. Collaborative Economy

When thinking about the collaborative economy in a traditional sense, it is based on the idea of individuals sharing their resources such as cars and homes. A more modern understanding of the shared or collaborative economy suggests that these resources can also extend to time, skills and even content. Based on the travel and mobility trends such as Uber, Lyft, Couchsurfing, Airbnb, BlaBlaCar, it is evident that consumers are both willing to create and to consume within this framework. This is primarily the source of shifting societal values, the boom of start-ups and the rise

of digital platforms that efficiently connect the customer to these services. As the users' understanding and motivation to collaborate and share shift, so do the services which accommodate the changes and needs. Collaborating and co-creating has the power to shape these services but also to induce a societal shift and understanding in the value that consumers give collaboration, as well as how it can be further enhanced and developed to meet ever-changing needs (Campos, et al., 2016; McCarthy, Stock & Verma, 2010; Prebensen, Vittersø & Dahl, 2013). This is especially prominent in the travel and tourism sector, which is susceptible to increased attention towards sustainable practices, as well as the presence of the web, online communities and social media platforms in the experience planning process (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009). The concept of co-creation is discussed in further detail in the next section.

The sociocultural and economic values that are most prevalent in a collaborative economy are proposed by Petrini, Freitas and Silviera (2017) in a framework concept. The values are the general practices, consumption habits, environmental awareness, quality of life, technological development, economic and social perspectives. These are also the dimensions and institutional frameworks that the consumer applies to the travel consumption experience to portray a specific role. This connection of the consumption experience and co-creation also leads to a shift in individual and communal behaviour, which as a collective result affects business models and development (Petrini, Freitas & Silviera, 2017). The most relevant understanding of 'sharing' for this research, according to the authors, is 'sharing as a method to intensify social relations'. Hamari, Sjöklint and Ukkonen (2016) outlined similar motives for individuals to participate in a collaborative economy. This interest has peaked with the use of communicative and social media platforms and given support to community-based online services. However, the authors also identified an attitude-behaviour gap when it comes to the collaborative economy. Mainly that although consumers perceive the collaborative or shared activity as positive for society and the economy, this positive attitude does not necessarily translate into action. As a result, it is a new challenge for companies and organisations to entice consumers to actively participate in the actions which they perceive as overall positive and beneficial.

Generally, this increased consumer awareness has led to the importance of collaborative and shared practices, which since 2013 have increasingly influenced the travel industry (Trivett & Staff, 2013; Tseng & Chiang, 2016). In the case of tourism and travel specifically, the presence of platforms and online services has escalated the importance of sharing and communicating both locally and when abroad (Trivett & Staff, 2013). The increased shift from ownership to access is continuously reinventing the peer to peer market, which has the potential to influence travel beyond the sharing of accommodation or transportation methods and instead create a new form of peer to

peer travel planning and experience creation. Generally, for collaborative economic practices, financial benefits are the key driver that motivates participation. Although sustainability or environmental benefits are often cited as a motive, generally these are not yet a primary concern for the user (Trivett & Staff, 2013). This is especially prevalent in tourism, considered instead as an added benefit to the economic or financial gain.

Technology and social media platforms have played an essential role in the growth of the collaborative economy (Trivett & Staff, 2013). With the use of technology, supply and demand can be matched across a much wider network than ever before. Social media also connects strangers and therefore enhances the level of trust, especially when it is evident that 'real people' are creating content as well. Companies and service providers can pay or sponsor content creation, but there is already the abundance of UGC which is created at the initiative of users and consumers. Botsman and Rogers (2011), as well as Hamari, Sjöklint and Ukkonen (2016), concluded that technology, cost consciousness, environmental awareness and the overall resurgence of community are the drivers of the collaborative or sharing economy. Therefore, the intrinsic and personal motivations of the self are accommodating the perception of sharing as something positive. There is a new desire to connect with others, and the information that is shared by 'peers' is often seen as more genuine and enriching than that of big corporations with questionable business practices. Trivett and Staff (2013) also argue that consumers are now more than ever searching for meaning and balance. Hence the consumer is defining themselves through experiences, rather than commodities. The desire for experiences grew out of shared transportation and accommodation and extended to the way that travel experiences are being valued and created. One of the most important lessons from shared car services is that convenience, low price and the social element is what is most appealing to those actively partaking in the collaborative economy. These lessons are also necessary for developing budget travel that aligns with the desire to define the self through experiences and to be a part of the overall collaborative network.

As it stands, a clear discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the collaborative economy is still missing (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). Although the movement has led to new and more direct relationships between products and consumers, which serves for authenticity, it also encourages consumers to take more risks. As a result, there is a societal paradox of desiring to be more collaborative, but at the same time, more individualistic. The researchers find that there is a social and behavioural dimension of 'trends'. As a result, it is unclear whether collaborative consumption is a genuine social movement or a carefully orchestrated business movement for profit. Therefore, the authors argue that there is a need for further evidence as to whether the

collaborative economy meets interests of the broader public sphere and which interests of the individual co-creation and collaborating serves.

2.2.1. Co-creation

Co-creation is commonly used to understand and assess the relationship between a company and its stakeholders or customers. It entails the perspectives and ideas from involved parties to produce a better overall value of the product or service. Co-creation in the scope of travel and tourism is becoming increasingly important for several reasons, which is further discussed in this section. Co-creation has been heavily researched from the perspective of the organisation or company (Arvidsson, 2005; Cova, Dallı & Zwick, 2011; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008; Rokka & Canniford, 2016; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, & Espersen, 2017). This previous research from organisation or brand perspective views co-creation as the branding or business value without fully incorporating the view of the consumer and the further value that the customers acting as co-creators can have for the service or product. Furthermore, co-creation from the business point of view is captured from a profit angle, whereas from the customer point of view, it offers an opportunity for a new type of growth and customer involvement. As already discussed, social media and WOM have changed the way that co-creation takes place, especially in modern day travel and destination branding. As a result, there is a need to understand the role of the customer for a holistic framework and deeper understanding of co-creation. Especially in travel, the customer is a significant part of determining the success of the services and brands. France, Merrilees and Miller (2015) propose that there are three primary roles of the customer in the co-creation process; brand engagement, self-congruity and category involvement. The authors suggest that the customer has a unique scope of power when it comes to the interaction with a brand and the value of the co-creation in creating brand awareness and trust.

As the role of the customer increases and develops into something more complex, co-creation has also led to the gap between the consumer and producer blurring (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). This new paradigm also results in the reassessment of the ethics behind these modern practices. Especially with travel and tourism, there is a bigger motive to share images, stories and experiences by the consumer, be it to motivate others or to translate an experience. Does the consumer feel connected to the practices of sharing experiences of a company, if there is no indication that the company acknowledges their contribution? Does the consumer instead create a sense of co-creation community with their travelling peers and the exchange of information is solely for aiding others to create their travel experience similarly? This is a type of collective production (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008), which can also take place without the

involvement of the company. However, it is not yet evident how large the collective production should be, for the individual to pick up the value which others have created for a brand or organisation.

Despite the value-added of including customers in branding, co-creation can also lead to implications for the brand. As organisations share more governance of the brand with stakeholders – in this case, the customers – the encounters which lead to co-creation require an element of structure (Hatch & Schulz, 2010). This structure has four basic building blocks for co-creation: dialogue, access, risk assessment and transparency, which according to the authors, entail the co-creation process through the network relationships and social interactions between the consumers themselves as well as the company. Furthermore, this is a constantly evolving process which is primarily identity-driven. The brand implications lie in that social media now has a new role in generating ‘situated creativity’ from the users as well as the establishment of a broader scope for dialogue, increased transparency and improved accessibility. This leads to the challenge of how to balance user engagement and actions, without losing control over the direction of the company, especially online.

Prebensen, Vittersø and Dahl (2013) set the premise for the value co-creation of tourist resources from the perspective of the consumer – specifically the value in the shaping of the self, given that the time and effort contribution for travel is valued differently from other goods and services. It is important to consider that travel and tourism are relatively unique as a service or ‘product’. For the consumer, the choice to travel is a want, rather than a need. Based on this, companies and brands must assess how this need can be leveraged through different motives; personal interests, enjoyment of new environments and the nurturing of personal needs and wants (Prebensen, Vittersø & Dahl, 2013). The travel process, in addition to the time investment, also requires specific planning, discussions and choosing processes which lead to a positive experience from the view of the consumer. The brand can facilitate these steps, but it is in the hands of the consumer to assign and co-create value alongside this. Tseng, Lung and Chiang (2016) researched the role of customer co-creation in improving the performance of travel products and in line with the current research on prosumption and co-creation, the findings indicate that value is essential to the success of a product’s performance. Furthermore, this research encourages brands to look at the resources available and with this foster a strong organisational culture with quality communications to ensure a better relationship between co-creation and product performance.

A common type of co-creation practice is user generated branding (UGC). These user generated activities are often considered under the scope of digital labour and prosumption which will be further discussed in the following sections. Burmann (2010) addresses the current lack of

research towards the successes and positives drives for UGC. The author suggests that UGC activities are overall on the rise, but often they are underestimated as a strengthening tool for organisational structures. The research finds that there is an overall negative view of UGC given that it is out of the control of the business. However, if a brand has a genuine interest in invoking UGC and engaging the customers in content creation, there are ways to create a supportive and thriving community around it. Therefore, the author suggests that UGC in a co-creation environment should be encouraged, but closely monitored online and on social media to know when the organisation should react to the content being created. The idea of UGC can be further seen in the collaborative and online activities discussed in further detail below.

2.2.2. Prosumption

As a result of growing co-creation practices, it is argued that current trends for businesses and their customer engagement have emerged from the changing relationships with capitalism. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) refer to this as a 'new world' of prosumption (producer-consumption), which is both material and digital. According to the authors, this is the result of an abundance of content information, leading to the use of this information co-create value. The authors argue that prosumers now have recognised their independence and agency, which therefore leads to a new type of freedom. In the case of tourism and travel, the meanings which are assigned to a travel experience are limitless. For example, Holbrook and Olney (1995) found that romanticism and 'wanderlust' desires from experiences are also linked to escapism and often depend on the current state of the individual. Bello and Etzel (1985) as well as Prebensen and Xie (2017) emphasise the importance of pursuing fantasies and fun in travel experiences. Therefore, this requires both flexibility and the interrelation of co-creation, travel experience, motivations and socio-economic factors. Co-creation, especially in this research approach therefore naturally leads to the idea of customers as investors into the brand or as prosumers – an individual who is both a producer and a consumer can be understood as the company leverages the customer to produce for them (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2012). This can be extremely subtle, especially in the online world – for instance, via online platforms and social media, most consumers are co-creating and collaborating. This co-creation and collaboration may not necessarily be the choice of the brand, and for some, it can create more issues than benefits. However, prosumers now play a notable role in giving a brand meaning and purpose as argued by the authors. Arvidsson (2005) argues that the prosumer trend has given brands shared meaning and a level of emotional involvement.

Further studies on prosumption in tourism are already indicating that this trend and the importance of the consumer will continue to be essential to the development of successful services.

For example, Campos, et al. (2016) argued that the consumer's memories of experiences influence future consumption habits, which has resulted in brand and services encouraging active participation, interaction as well as an overall sense of attention. The authors present two perspectives that should therefore be considered. First, the emphasis on active participation of events, which results in a central network in an experience network for the customers. Second, a deeper consideration of the specific experiences which mobilize the travellers to engage in relation to their peers. This also is connected to the new role of WOM as discussed above.

McCabe (2014) argues that tourism, by its nature, already entails a certain degree of inseparability between production and consumption. However, despite this closeness, consumers have had close to no influence on shaping the experience, as already argued. Therefore, through the empowerment that the web provides for the consumer, there is a new 'consciousness paradigm' (McCabe, 2014). This consciousness leads to the consumer searching for real value and what is behind the brand name and premise. What does then actually motivate the actions of the consumer to produce for a brand? Chandler and Chen (2013) as well as Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) both argue that prosumerism flourishes in online spaces. The online spaces lead to the prosumer creation of values affecting the general boundaries of a company or its services. The role of the prosumer has been heavily researched in the context of service design and experience (Chandler & Chen, 2013). However, the travel context stands to be explored in more depth, especially with the context of a specific travel service which can have a multitude of values assigned to it by the individuality of the consumer as well as the respective communities which may emerge depending on the social media outreach. It is necessary to differentiate the prosumer from a passive consumer, given that the prosumer, as argued, can already create value-added to the organisation (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Thus, there is a need for empirical research on how prosumers participate and what leads to the prosumption processes. Not every consumer wishes to co-create, and not every service or product can combine consumer creativity alongside the business goals. Chandler and Chen (2013) further argue that in order to fully understand the motive and role of the prosumer, it is equally necessary to assess how a company welcomes or creates accessibility for the value creation role of the consumer. Finally, the prosumption output cannot always be predicted or aligned with the expectations of the company. The emphasis of community and the creation of social capital should be equally important for the company as well as the prosumer.

Numerous existing researches on prosumerism, travel motivations and travel experiences all point towards the 'identification of the self' for the consumer (Arvidsson, 2005; Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Chandler & Chen, 2013; Holt, 2010; Prebensen, Vittersø & Dahl, 2013; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Smaliukine, Chi-Shiun & Sizovaite, 2015). These motivations can also be divided into two

categories; the individual motivations and the social motivations (Chandler & Chen, 2013). The former are intrinsic motivations of the self, whereas the latter is driven by strengthening social networks, community building and a strong sense of connection to other users. The two are not mutually exclusive, and a company can leverage these motivations of the prosumer to lead to content and interaction most beneficial to them in a specific social media context. Based on the understanding of prosumerism that is established, there is growing evidence that the tourism and travel sector can benefit from the consumer who is in a more unique and stronger position to create this value than the company itself might be (Cavagnaro, Staffieri & Postma, 2018; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Tseng & Chiang, 2015)

Niezgoda (2013) proposes both general processes of contemporary markets as well as features which are unique to the tourism market. The general processes consist of free time, escapism, individualistic behaviours and desires, consumer knowledge - especially that, which is developed through experiences - and the increasing expectations of high-quality services. This means that the consumer choices are no longer limited to a product or service meeting specific functions, but the author finds that there is a further desire for the product or service to reflect the lifestyle of the consumer. These purchase choices and patterns create an overall developing and unique image of the modern consumer and their consumption habits. The uniqueness of the tourist market emerges from the high number of services attempting to offer a relatively complex and not at all a standardised product. As already argued, the value of the travel experience can differ highly from one individual to another, especially when there is a self-serving bias of wishing to differentiate the self from the rest. Therefore, the author emphasizes the importance of individualisation as a key unique feature of the travel and tourism market, and this is best conceptualised by actively involving the prosumer. These ideas of the processes are also linked to the travel consumption experience which is discussed in a later section.

2.2.3. Digital Labour

The rise of co-creation and prosumption in business practices can also have unintended consequences on the perception of leisure and active social media participation of the individual. With the prominence of sharing online and the abundance of information, previously simple online behaviour has translated to new forms of engagement, even with social media platforms. Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) propose that online participation on platforms such as Facebook is considered as 'digital labour'. Generally, platforms use this free labour to further create and curate content according to the user, such as personalised or targeted advertisements. This definition of labour is based on Marx's two views on labour. Firstly, that concrete work produces use-values and secondly,

that abstract labour generates value. In general, users online create communities and a network of information exchange based on unique interpretations of the world, which leads to meaning-making and finally; as a result, a network of people are co-creating a product or an experience.

This is strongly linked to the ideas of the collaborative economy, co-creation and the prosumer, as already discussed. However, a specific nuance of digital labour is that it is the result of participatory culture on social media and therefore becomes a combination of cognition, communication and co-operation. Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) further discuss that digital labour is often voluntary, and there is no obligation to use services or to 'work'. Whereas Karl Marx argued that workers were often alienated from the product, the authors present that digital environments foster meaningful connections. The downfall of digital labour is that it can to an extent, lead to users becoming addicted to online platforms and social media, which can lead to overall unproductiveness.

On the one hand, it is essential to consider the user motives to communicate and to exchange information on these platforms. On the other hand, users should still feel in control of their behaviour and communications. As Facebook's objects of labour are genuine human experiences, they are being made public in ways that did not exist before digital environments (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). It is important to note that in the context of travel, sharing and communicating can have more value-added than other industry sectors (Lan, et al., 2017; Lin & Lu, 2010; McCarthy, Stock & Verma, 2010). Given the highly personalised nature of travel experiences and the degree of differentiation in personalities, there is an inherent interest of the individual to participate in this 'labour'. The authors underline that digital labour should be 'playful digital work' and this leaves the scope of producing travel experiences as playful work to be explored. Fuchs (2014) also presents digital prosumption and labour in the context of time and capitalism. Individuals now have more disposable time than ever before, which leads to more consumption, creativity and leisure. According to Fuchs (2014), users should err on the side of caution to volunteer their leisure time into free labour when this intervenes with the societal perception of leisure and personal time.

2.3. Travel Consumption Experience

Understanding the overall experience of travel and the way it is consumed – either through the journey, planning, destinations or values can be challenging. There are a multitude of influences on the consumer in addition to the countless destinations and ways to travel. Firstly, it is necessary to define the consumption process in general, which can then be applied to the travel framework. Holt (1995) discusses the consumers' consumption experience from a general purchase-satisfaction perspective. The experience can be summarised as the act of consuming is both varied and effortful

from the perspective of the consumer. Furthermore, Holt (1995) presents three consumption metaphors: the experience, the interaction and the classification. These three metaphors are interconnected and present the consumers with a specific understanding of the stages of the experience cycle. The overarching concept can then be broken down to the relevant consumption attributes. The author emphasises that experience is not controlled by the consumer, but instead, the experience is embedded in specific social words and the consumer perceives this 'social world'. The customer personally reflects on the following elements; accounting (making sense), evaluating and appreciating. Based on this, the consumption experience must entail these three notions given that the consumers do not create new experiences but are applying an expected 'framework' on the product or experience. Therefore, it is necessary to research the institutional frameworks which are applied in order to create engagement. In the context of a travel consumption experience, it is relevant to assess what the dynamics of travelling are. Consumers are seeking a specific experience which they then account, evaluate and appreciate with the goal to take on a role which enables 'participation' in this travel world context, based on Holt's (1995) description of the consumption experience. Consuming is not merely a lone experience, but there is always an underlying motive or benefit for both the consumer and the brand.

When looking at the modern or the 'next generation' traveller, there are three main themes to their travel experience; the use of digital services, the search for unique experiences and the aspect of social interaction (Phang, 2013). These elements as defined, have grown alongside the changes in the travel experience and are strongly intertwined in the whole travel and tourism process. Firstly, the modern traveller is often perceived to expect an element of personalisation in their travel, rather than traditional patterns. Furthermore, information is always anticipated to be available, even when on the go, using mobile data on smartphones. Secondly, the traveller desires a determined beginning and end point – the established place of easily accessible departure and a specific destination goal - but to create their unique personal path in between the points. This sentiment is related to the desire of being unique and an 'explorer' rather than a 'tourist'. More than ever before, differentiation and authentic experiences are valued over replicating an expected experience or a set itinerary (Leung, Law, Van Hoof & Buhalis, 2013). Third, the element of social interaction, which can be strongly linked to the collaborative economy, which is explored in depth in a later section. There is now a constant flow of interaction and conversation between family and friends, both online and offline. The authors find that customer behaviours have extended to interactive 'conversations' with brands (Arvidsson, 2005; Fournier & Avery, 2011). This brand engagement can also be a part of the way the travel experience is defined, valued and experienced (Phang, 2013).

Existing research categorises the travel experience from the perspective of the customer into three main segments: the pre-trip phase, during-trip phase and post-trip phase (Leung, et al., 2013). These stages together shape the customer's expectations and desires of an experience, which can be generalised across different travel modes as well as destinations. The travel experience has also been linked to romanticism and intrinsic spiritual desires. Holbrook and Olney (1995) explore this notion of consumer behaviour, which is called 'wanderlust' – the drive of the romantic and spiritual desires for planning and taking trips. On the one hand, the observation of wanderlust is simply exploring whether there is reliability in the assumption that these behavioural tendencies justify certain exploratory traits. On the other hand, wanderlust is often used for capturing the motives of the next generation traveller, with the term having a societal value (Sotiriadis, Cinà Van Zyl, Sotiriadis, & Van Zyl, 2013).

Based on Meisenzahl's (2017) analysis of the relationship between brand love and the experience, as well as connecting the customer's desires and expectations of the experience there is a need for further understanding the formation of the brand identity. Brand love as summarised by the authors has origins in the emotional conditioning we may have with a service or product, but this can also be extended to customer-brand relationships, passion for a brand or simply the positive presence of a brand in the consumers' lives. By assessing the customer-brand relationship, how can this be assembled both physically and online for success? Ghodeswar (2008) argues that the brand identity needs to emerge from a detailed understanding of a company's customers, competitors and the overall market environment. Based on this, there is a proposal for a four-step framework for establishing the concept of the brand. According to the author, the framework includes the brand positioning, brand message, brand performance and brand equity. Traditionally, this type of framework application exists for traditional brands. However, current travel and tourism services are also beginning to shape themselves beyond 'service provision'. Using this type of a framework should, therefore, be used to connect the brand and the customer. Most importantly, the customer's travel consumption experience should be envisioned in the brand identities of the social media space.

2.3.1. The Push and the Pull

When there is an understanding of what motivates the customer, the services and brands can leverage this for business. The concept of 'push' and 'pull' was initially proposed for migration and the motivation to move in Europe in the 50s and 60s by Zimmermann (1996). Since then, multiple authors have used the concepts for research on travel and tourism.

In the scope of travel, the 'push' is considered internal and psychological; the 'pull' is considered as the external attraction of experiences and activities. Bello and Etzel (1985) approach the push and the pull from the differentiation between novel and commonplace trips, and how these affect the internal and external desires and experiences of the individual. The authors conclude that the pushes are strongly linked to previous novelty experiences. Xu, Morgan and Song (2009) discuss the customer motivations from a different perspective, which concludes that the motivation for travel in most situations can be reduced to either escapism or the desire for new experiences. Riley (1988) proposes that the characteristics of the traveller influences the push and pull factors based on their current positioning in life and society. This study by Riley (1988) frames the travel motivations around careers, dissatisfaction with everyday life or one's current situation in a sense where travel is not simply a 'break' or a 'vacation'. Instead, the traveller was long term interests to change their lives. Jang and Cai (2002) use push and pull factors to create an overall prediction of the user's travel motivation patterns in terms of experience and destination choice. There is an inherent linkage between motivation and actual travel behaviour. A study specifically investigating the push and pull practices of students had additional findings on what shapes the push and pull factors. On top of the expected and most common factors for travel motivations, there is the added 'lifestyle' factor (Kim, Oh, & Jogaratnam, 2007). This differentiation based on the demographics of the research population suggests that the age of the traveller can further impact the behaviour. Based on these findings of previous research on the push and pull factors in travel, it is unclear what motivates the user's choice of the company or organisation for travel. The previous studies can therefore be used to shape the push and pull of travel and the underlying assumptions by grouping the intrinsic and extrinsic values, the influence of the socio-demographic status of the traveller and social values. By understanding the differentiation that can occur in the motivations to travel and justification for destination choice, the development of a new travel brand and marketing strategy can take place (Jang & Cai, 2002).

The authenticity of consumption and the significance of the journey is evident in the way that the individual highlights their travel experiences and their personal values associated with travel. Obeneur (2003) investigated the importance that the individual imposes on their choices. The study found that this leads to specific expectations of experiences based on values such as self-development, self-understanding, personal relationships or acquiring knowledge. Cavagnaro, Staffieri and Postma (2017) further explored the importance of value orientations and the meaning it gives to the travel experience. The importance of values in the consumption experience denotes that the company must encompass these values to provide a service, which aligns with customer expectations. Furthermore, the authors conclude that there is an expectation of flexibility and

openness from the brand. On the one hand, it is vital for a company to recognise the values and desires of the consumer. On the other hand, the company can also be in the position of creating the pulls or introducing them to the customer. Therefore, the self-awareness of the consumer should not be undermined, which further links to the travel consumption experience as well as the role of social media in connecting the brand and the customer.

2.4. Low Cost Travel

Assessing the satisfaction and purchase patterns of low-cost travels has primarily been researched in the context of airlines. Kim and Lee (2009) concluded that WOM, re-purchase intentions and actively complaining play a notable role in the perception of low-cost carriers. Most importantly, the authors found that for the best results in customer satisfaction, clear tangibles and responsiveness methods need to be established for the brand. For customers, the responsiveness of the service provider in multiple contexts affects the performance and purchase intention. The element of responsiveness from a brand stands to be further researched in the context of budget travel providers, and how this can be further enhanced in the current travel behaviour context. Gillen and Morrison (2003), as well as Diaconu (2012), found that the accessibility strongly influences the customer purchase intention and perception of a brand. Namely that low-cost air carriers are often situated in remote airports, which can hinder the budget travel goals of the individual. Furthermore, this can extend to the overall perception of the journey. Research also has shown that there is a significant bias for younger travellers taking budget options (O'Connell & Williams, 2005). This research was done in the context of budget airlines, but it provides for an understanding of the influence that age demographics can have on service. Furthermore, the authors found that this demonstrates that price, despite the branding, is the most important factor for the customer.

Existing research on Flixbus is somewhat limited, given that the company was founded only in 2011. Guihéry (2016) explores the re-emergence of long-distance coach travel in France and Germany from a road transport perspective and the related market developments. Power-relations and human mobility in the context of borderscapes are illustrated with the example of Flixbus by Teunissen (2018). This takes a migration policy direction on the service and presents an understanding of mobility in the European Union. As already discussed, Misenzahl (2017) uses Flixbus as an example for understanding brand experiences and brand love, which therefore results in a quantified understanding of the company as well as branding strategies. Further research which uses Flixbus as an example is market-oriented and the planning of logistics (Fregonas, 2019; Zett, 2018) or then digital platforms and the digital economy (Waas, Pavlou & Gramano, 2018). The overview of existing research using suggests that there is scope for further understanding the assembling and branding of the company from a social science perspective.

3. Method

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodology used to investigate the research goal of this paper. The goal is to explore the role of the consumer in co-creating low-cost travel brand, with the example of Flixbus. The research objectives include analysing to what extent does Flixbus influence the travel behaviour of their customers and how much they consider the overall changes in travel consumption that have taken place in the last decade. The impact on travel consumption are the socio-economic trends which entice budget travel and the accompanying desires of the customers and finally, the motivations and desires which are expressed by Flixbus on their social media. For achieving the objectives, the concepts of the travel consumption experience, the push and pull of travel, co-creation, collaborative economy, prosumption, social media and WOM are analysed using qualitative research methods. For the methodology, the choice of using both in-depth semi-structured interviews and thematic content analysis was made. Mixed methods provide for two perspectives on the findings which can then be compared. The interviews are a source of primary information from the users, whereas the thematic content analysis of social media gives further insight into the extent of travel co-creation by Flixbus. By using a thematic analysis on posting styles, values were found to be reflected in both the imagery and the captions. The analysis of the interviews showed that these social values are also actively considered by the traveller when discussing their experiences. The chosen approach allows for a flexible but thorough understanding of which travel concepts are most prevalent and essential to the user. First, this chapter will discuss the choice of mixed qualitative methods with the use of thematic content analysis. Then, the data selection and collection process will be discussed and justified. Finally, the steps undertaken for data analysis are explained.

3.1. Methodology & Research Design

The choice of a qualitative research method is motivated by the goal to explain the values and perceptions of individuals and the reflection of this in the branding of budget travel through co-creation. Furthermore, this research is exemplified using Flixbus as a case study. The fundamental concepts for the analysis are abstract, flexible and unquantifiable on a scale or assessed as variables. Therefore, qualitative methods are suited best to accommodate the nature of these defining concepts. Flick (2014) describes current day usage of qualitative research methods to combine traditional types of data, such as interviews or focus groups, with visual or textual data. This creates a methodological approach which enables a new way to understand both individual and social experiences, as well as to describe new travel processes and co-creation practices which have emerged. In social science, by using existing theories to create an overall framework around the

mixed methods research, the theory serves as a guide (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The theories on social media usage and branding inform the thematic content analysis of social media and the theories on travel behaviour, motivation and the shaping of experience is used to guide the interview process. The mixed method therefore leads to the integration of the qualitative data gathered which therefore leads to a dataset that matches the overarching theories.

Qualitative data analysis is used in this case to describe a phenomenon – the co-creation role of the customer in the context of Flixbus (Flick, 2014). Specifically, the co-creation practices as well as the curation of Flixbus' social media posts, the travel interests of the consumer and to explain the extent of alignment between the brand and the customer. Given the potential to access in-depth information through qualitative approaches, this research utilised a mixed method of semi-structured interviews and a content analysis of images. Furthermore, the mixed qualitative methodology allows for the flexibility the guiding concepts require.

3.1.1. In-Depth Interviews

The interviews serve as a source of primary data from the perspective of the consumer. This data will be analysed whether the consumer values align with the travel concepts of travel motivation, push and pull, WOM, co-creation, sustainability, social media usage and prosumerism. The data will be used to assess the level of alignment between customer desires and how Flixbus shapes its social media based on the understanding of travel. Firstly, it is necessary to understand the individual's values of the travel consumption experience and the pushes and pulls of their destination and journey planning. Secondly, assessing their awareness and level of involvement with societal trends and collaborative economy practices will provide for sensitising concepts against which the social media analysis can be contrasted.

This factual data obtained from interviews serve to shape the understanding of the travel consumption experience and the expectations of the consumer (Flick, 2014). The interview method was chosen due to its strengths for qualitative research given the outlined goal to explore an individual's thoughts and opinions on a topic in depth (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Flick, 2014). As one of the goals is also to explore the experience of the Flixbus user, an interview accommodates the conversational nature best suited to discuss travel topics and own experiences and views. The selective population sampling for the interviews also allowed for flexibility. The research objectives are to explore the concept of travel in a more general sense; what the individual desires, what creates value for their experiences and which factors influence the decision-making and planning processes. Another objective is to assess Flixbus in the context of the traveller – what desires does the budget travel brand meet, and how. Therefore, it is beneficial to interview a variety of users of

the Flixbus service. The use of in-depth interviews also has some limitations. For instance, if a respondent is not too talkative, it can be hard to elicit answers naturally and to lead to a further in-depth discussion of the concepts. Finally, as the interviews are time-consuming, the number which can be conducted in the research timeframe is limited, especially if there are difficulties to schedule interviewees.

3.1.2. Social Media Analysis

The choice of image analysis is the primary manner by which to analyse how the social processes are visualised on social media by Flixbus. Rose (2016) suggests that content analysis for images is one of the most common approaches to analysing visual images and the goal is to uncover the latent meanings, which therefore allows this deeper level of meaning-making, as complimented by the user interviews. Semiology, as argued by Rose (2016), offers a type of analytical precision and critical assessment that demonstrates how social differences are created. Hesse-Biber (2010) emphasises the practices of using mixed methods in qualitative research to accommodate a more extensive insight into the ongoing research. Furthermore, by using mixed methods, there is the possibility to have a 'multilayered view of the nuances of social reality' (p.456). Based on the qualitative approaches to mixed methods that Hesse-Biber (2010) presents, two of these prove to be most beneficial for this exploratory research. Firstly, to better understand the research objectives by triangulating the interview and social media findings with that of existing theories. By comparing the results of the two methods, a better understanding of brand alignment with customer values can be compiled. This also accommodates additional information which may have only emerged from one of the two methods. Secondly, by using mixed methods in this research, there is the possibility to identify factors which can advocate for social transformation in socio-economic values and trends. The combination of two methods can challenge the existing knowledge and provide a critical new perception of the theoretical concepts (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Although the idea of 'dual perspective' is often used for combining quantitative and qualitative methods, in this research, the dual perspective provides for a customer and a brand view of the research goal.

Finally, the choice of methods is justified by the exploratory stance that this research paper takes. Stebbins (2001) outlines that an exploratory research paper aims to investigate a problem or a general idea and to identify the associated issues, thematic content analysis is used. By combining primary and secondary methods – the primary being a combination of semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis of social media content and the secondary research a gathering of travel concepts and values from a thorough literature review. The advantage of exploratory research allows for flexibility and to lay the foundation for future research. Flixbus as a company has not been

thoroughly researched yet, especially in the context of travel, co-creation and its customers, this research paper is looking at co-creating budget travel in a new light. Furthermore, the shifts in travel and social values are ever-changing and the current research scope would shed new light on the combination of grounded concepts on newer social processes. Therefore, the travel concepts used for analysis, are grounded in existing literature and theories, whereas the content and interview subjects provide for new information.

3.2. Thematic Content Analysis

The chosen method for this research was thematic content analysis methodology. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that this form of analysis allows the identification of patterns and themes in the data. These 'themes' which emerge from the data should relate to the research objectives and have importance in explaining a situation or phenomenon. Thematic analysis entails multiple rounds of coding to find these themes and categories that provide a structure for understanding the data. When the analysis is conducted in a deductive style, the categories emerge from existing theories and ideas. In this case, the deductive analysis is guided by the travel experience and value concepts; the push and pull, co-creation, collaborative economy, presumption, sustainability, social media and WOM.

The process of analysis has multiple stages, which has been suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) to consist of four main phases. (1) immersion into the data, (2) general coding of all the data, (3) categorisation stage, (4) refinement and assessing the themes. By carrying out the repeated steps of analysis and structuring the emergent themes, the research objective of understanding the role of the customer in the co-creation of the Flixbus brand can be addressed. Given the abstract nature of concepts and the travel experience, the deductive thematic analysis offers the flexibility necessary for this research paper. By allowing the freedom of interpretation of the data, a new understanding of the Flixbus experience outside of the constraints of previous expectations could be achieved (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Silverman, 2015).

3.3. Considerations Around the Dataset

As discussed, this research utilised a qualitative mixed methodology for analysis. The data collection process consisted of the collection of Flixbus' social media posts; namely from Instagram and Facebook as well as conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews. Below, the data selection and collection process will be justified and explained. The in-depth interviews were guided by existing research into travel motivations, experiences, WOM, and travel values. This dataset would provide for an understanding of the customer, and their role in their travel experiences. The social

media content analysis was guided by theories on social media, branding and co-creation practices. The data from social media should give insight as to what extent there is alignment by what is expressed by the customer in their travel desires and values and how they co-create a budget travel brand. The mixed methodology enables a comparison between the obtained data and a triangulation between the findings and existing theories. Given the explorative nature of the research, this enables the flexibility for new findings and ideas outside of the existing understanding of co-creating budget travel.

3.3.1. Selection: Corpus Social Media

For the data from the social media content, Instagram and Facebook were selected as Flixbus is most active on these two platforms and the two allow for different types of interaction with the customers as well as creativity in content creation. On Facebook, Flixbus has 2.1 million likes and posts on average three times a week. On Instagram, Flixbus has just under 100,000 followers and posts on average every two weeks. Twitter was not used for data collection, as it is primarily a text-based platform with short messages. It was considered that Twitter data would not provide the right type of information necessary for the thematic content analysis for this research. Flixbus' social media strategy in communications is highly based on visual images and the impression that destination pictures have on the user. Therefore, Facebook and Instagram are considered as the superior channels for visual communication on social media, rather than Twitter, for example. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) discuss that tourism is strongly related to the creation of visual media, sometimes in the sense of a 'modern postcard' but often because the visual representation of an experience can be conveyed much strongly than textual information. Facebook and Instagram enable a relatively direct connection between the customers and interested parties. The concepts which are tightly linked with the travel experience and desires of the individual should then be strongly represented in Flixbus' social media. This leverages the 'pull' that the company has and its understanding of the customers' 'push'.

Maximum variation sampling was used for this research paper. This allows for a purposeful collection of a wide range of perspectives (Flick, 2013), which fits the research objectives. Additionally, this sampling method accommodates the full range of post types that have been published by Flixbus, and therefore, no accidental exclusion of relevant data will occur. Flick (2013) further discusses that maximum variation sampling will provide for a wide range of different behaviours, experiences and qualities, which ideally meets the theoretical concepts of this paper. With a maximum variation in the collected data, the common themes can be identified. 155 posts were collected, 98 from Instagram and 57 from Facebook. The posts were picked between January

2017 and April 2019. This time frame was chosen as it matched the overall growth in popularity of the Flixbus service, therefore proving for alignment between business growth and the marketing or communication efforts. Google Trends suggests that in June 2016 there was the first notable increase of interest in Flixbus and June-July 2017 showed a significant increase in the search term 'Flixbus' which has been on an upward trend since then. In 2017, Flixbus had expanded to 27 European countries (Teunissen, 2018), thereby having a large enough presence to justify and encourage proactive marketing on social media platforms.

The second stage of the research took place in the form of in-depth interviews with users of Flixbus. This was done because the interviews provide the consumer perspective on the motivations, values and experiences that is desirable in travel. The research objectives to explore the concept of travel in a general sense of the experience, but additionally assess the Flixbus from the view of the user is therefore supported by the interview setting. The participants selected for the interviews had to meet the criteria that they are or have previously been a user of Flixbus services. There was no restriction on demographics due to the generalised nature of the research and the focus on travel concepts and co-creation, rather than differentiating between the travel experiences of different individuals. However, it was found that individuals under the age of 30 were most inclined to share their travel and Flixbus experiences. Four interviews were conducted in person, with three male participants and one female. The participants were selected at random and they were sought out through Facebook pages based in Rotterdam. An overview of the interview subjects can be found in appendix A.

3.3.2. Data Collection

Flixbus' Instagram and Facebook social media data was collected using desktop browser versions of the platforms. This choice enabled high-quality screenshots to be gathered which were then organised in Atlas.ti – a specialised software for qualitative data analysis. The Instagram posts contained both the image with the accompanying caption and hashtags but the comments from users were not included in this analysis. Facebook posts were collected in the same manner – the text of the post and any accompanying images.

The four interviews took place face to face and were conducted in public places. This was to ensure that the participants felt comfortable and the neutral setting should facilitate a relaxed conversation. The interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone and some accompanying notes were made by the interviewer during the process. Overall, the objective of the interview was to have a natural conversation, to avoid imposing ideas on the participant (for the interview guide, see appendix B). The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and then organised in Atlas.ti to

facilitate a thematic analysis, as was done for the social media posts. Hermanowicz (2002) emphasises the importance of being fully invested in the interview process and through careful listening and observation, allowing more in-depth insights to emerge. By being aware of the right cues for either probing further or allowing the participant to think about their response or the question itself, the respondent can become more comfortable with the interview situation, especially when discussing matters which may be emotional or more personal. The travel values and experiences, as well as one's self-identity in the current social context, may be hard for interviews to present verbally. Therefore, the ideas were discussed casually, and deeper insights could gradually be developed based on this.

3.3.3. Data Analysis

Coding of both the social media posts and interview transcripts were done as soon as possible after data collection. Timeliness ensured that the data was highly familiar and any nuances that were initially recognised could be noted. For the thematic content analysis to lead to the understanding of data and to address the research questions, both rigour and systematic approach are necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This descriptive presentation of qualitative data follows a six-step process as outlined by the authors, which results in the identification of the common themes and patterns which emerge from the data. This process can either identify the semantic themes, which are explicit and mainly surface level meanings or the latent themes which are more in depth. The latter process examines all underlying ideas, assumptions or conceptualisations which exist in the dataset, which can then be theorised to shape the semantic content. The phases, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), are as follows: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3), the search for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining the themes and (6) discussing the findings.

The identification of the underlying themes requires a high level of familiarity with the dataset, understanding the themes and the assessment of whether the data fits the themes and finally if any overlapping themes could be merged. Furthermore, there is the possibility of the emergence of essential subthemes. Allowing for new information to emerge ensures critical assessment and a deeper understanding of the sensitising concepts. The goal of the analysis is to determine the overarching code themes, which may be aided through the creation of a thematic map which visualises how the themes and underlying ideas connect (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The purpose of the initial coding process was to organise the data and to become more systematic with the meanings that can be found. This was done with an open method to develop ideas and patterns while keeping in mind the research goals and the theoretical concepts. The concepts

guiding the coding were the based on social media theories, co-creation and prosumerism. In addition, the theories related to travel values and experiences were also taken into consideration. This result of this step can be seen in the results section. The second step of the coding process was to determine the themes in the codes. These themes were primarily deduced from ideas that appear significant for the research objectives – such as the destination pull, the self-value of the traveller or the intrinsic push. These themes indicate ideas through specific images or words that are used to frame Flixbus' social media posts. The goal in the second step of the coding process was to group codes into themes while reducing overlap. The third step was to analyse the emergent themes further. In cases of overlap, both the codes and themes were further assessed to determine if the themes could be consolidated or the codes required further in-depth analysis to give them significance and meaning in a new light. It is crucial that the data continues to support the themes to provide for conclusive findings. Furthermore, some codes were changed from themes or added to a sub-theme. At this point, the meaning and full understanding of the themes could be outlined. What is the importance and significance of the theme, and what does it capture? Finally, the themes could be then arranged to see where the strongest connections between concepts and ideas exist and how this supports the research questions and objectives.

Using the structure outlined above, the 155 social media posts and four interview transcripts were coded, and the main categories and themes were established. The analysis, as mentioned, was guided by the theoretical concepts. The interviews and social media posts were all coded under separate 'projects' in Atlas.Ti as to allow for comparison between the findings of the interviews and the findings from social media posts. Repeated instances of specific phrasing, terminology or the type of vocabulary used proved as evidence. In images, for example, it was the chosen landscape or cityscape with specific colours, often at sunset – which could be linked to wanderlust, freedom and the romanticism of foreign travel. The city images provide for either architecture, adventure or a sense of excitement. When the open codes felt exhaustive, it was evident that these could be categorised. The categorising process was about finding similarities and relationships that did not transcend between the categories themselves. In instances where open codes were too vague, the images and texts from interviews were assessed once again. Often, this led to viewing the data in a new light. The following chapter will provide the results of the thematic analysis and discuss the findings in-depth.

The limitations of the thematic content analysis is flexibility. It is the inherent advantage, but without proper rigour, it can prevent a structured analysis from being conducted. This limitation was combated by a structured and repeated coding process, which ensures that all data was considered equally but with care. The deductive process was guided by established concepts from existing

research, which ensures structure. Furthermore, by using a mixed method approach the number of interviews that were conducted was limited in order to limit the dataset to a manageable size for the research.

3.4. Validity and reliability

The validity of qualitative research according to Kirk and Miller (1986) is the “degree to which the findings are interpreted in a correct way”. However, the authors note that validity in qualitative research is difficult to attain and therefore qualitative research in social sciences relies heavily on the reliability instead. Reliability according to Kirk and Miller (1986) is therefore the extent to which the findings of the research are independent of unintended circumstances of the research. Seale (1999) therefore suggests that external reliability which would involve replicating the study is a challenge for qualitative research. However, there is value in ensuring internal validity. For this exploratory research, internal validity was achieved through the rigorous and systematic coding process as described above. Furthermore, by developing clear code categories and themes, the interpretation of the data is evident to others. For the in-depth interviews, a clear interview guide was developed based on the theoretical framework which would ensure a similar discussion of the topics with the different respondents. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, which provides for validity in interpreting the dataset as well. Flick (2014) describes the process of transcription as problematic due to its selective nature and can be subjected to bias. The validity of the transcripts can therefore be enhanced by including pauses, laughs or the description of physical actions, as argued by the author. Furthermore, it was stated that the validity and reliability of the coding process is supported by the same individual conducting the interview, transcribing and then analysing the data, which was ensured in this research.

4. Analysis & Results

The aim of the research was to create an understanding as to what extent does the consumer play a role in the co-creation of branding budget travel. The research question was broken down to three main elements; the socio-economic values which impact travel, the personal values and experiences of the customer and the travel motivations and desires which are expressed on social media by companies. For the analysis of social media, Flixbus' Instagram and Facebook content were used, given its recent emergence on the market and high presence in the choices of European budget-conscious travellers. In-depth interviews were conducted with users of Flixbus to gain further insight into the values of the consumer and their perception on budget travel and their role in co-creating the image of the brand. This exploratory research considered the act of tourism as an essential part of co-creation and how this is mediated by both the users and Flixbus on social media.

The results chapter is structured as follows; first, the overarching themes and categories from the social media content analysis and interviews are presented. Second, the findings of the interviews and social media content analysis are presented under three main categories; social media, collaborative economy and digital practices, and the travel consumption experience. The three sections of findings triangulate the findings of the interviews and social media content analysis with the overarching theories which guide the analysis. The mixed methodology therefore provides for a two-perspective view of co-creating budget travel and the role that social media as well as the customers play in this process. Furthermore, the exploratory nature of the research enabled for flexibility to consider phenomena or trends outside of the theoretical framework which emerged from the data analysis itself.

4.1. Overview of Themes and Categories

To analyse the role of the consumer in the co-creation of budget travel, a thematic analysis of social media content and in-depth semi structured interviews were used for data collection. The multiple rounds of coding resulted in 20 categories that could be clustered into five main overarching themes. The themes with their respective categories can be seen below:

Theme	Category
Destinations and physical locations to discover	Cities and Countries Monuments and Physical Descriptors Nature: Water/Forests/Mountains/Seaside
Inherent travel motivations and emotions	Activities: culinary, shopping, sports, leisure Internal Values: Escapism, Relaxation, Discovery External Values: Bucket List, Peers, Hot spots Spontaneity, Positive Associations, “Wanderlust” Self-identity
Communication techniques for branding	Promotions and Sales Invitation for Recommendations Shared Content Shared Experiences
Social media techniques and activities – customer/brand	Connecting to Peers/Family Ease of Access Collaborating With Creators/Sponsored Content Shared stories
Budget travel/Flixbus features	Affordability Trends Short-mid Distance Travel Appealing to Student Life

Table 1: Code Themes and Code Categories

4.2. Social Media

The role of the travellers as the co-creators of their own experience is highly prevalent on social media, both from the actions of the consumers as well as the way brands and services utilize the social media platforms. Campos, et al. (2016) found that service providers need to make memorable experiences but also involve the customers in the design, production and the overall consumption experience. In order to understand the role of social media and thereby the research sub-question of “*What are the travel motivations and desires of the individual that can be curated on social media?*”, this section will look at service branding practices through social media as well as the customer social media usage for travel.

The analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed that the primary motives of social media usage for the customer is to plan their trip, to gather information but also to share experiences with their peers and friends. Analysing the social media data of Flixbus revealed that the branding of budget travel and embracing the view of the customer is best done by proactively sharing images and experiences of the customers, collaborating with photographers and bloggers and for creating an overall ‘accessibility’ to the brand. In the following sections, the two different perspectives on the role of social media will be further analysed and discussed.

4.2.1. Branding Through Social Media

The analysis of the content revealed that the role of social media shapes the way that the consumers perceive a destination or a journey. Hudson and Thal (2013) discussed the influence of social media on the purchase decision-making process. Specifically, they found that social media platforms are intertwining brand services into different parts of the decision-making process. The analysis of the social media content found this to be valid to an extent. Most notably, in the case of Flixbus there is a bigger emphasis on what destinations or experiences are available to the consumer. This destination focus takes away the focus on simply selling a coach travel ticket. Evidence for this emerged in the form of captions and posts made by Flixbus on both Facebook and Instagram. When a consumer is in the consideration phase of a trip and browsing the available options and information, Flixbus leverages this stage by presenting new ideas, destinations or experiences. For instance, the suggestion of a music festival or a week of Carnival celebrations in Cologne (Appendix C). As a result, a potential customer considering a new experience or the opportunity to travel has Flixbus 'connecting' them to the experience through social media. The process of deciding on a destination is already presented on Instagram, without the need to figure out the logistics. It is assumed that by seeing a Flixbus post for a trip or event, the user would know that the service and route are available to them.

It was further found through analysing social media content that Flixbus is also making use of the current 'travelgram' trend (Shuqair & Cragg, 2017). The travelgram is specifically curated with images that create the desire to travel and to explore. With this, Flixbus is overcoming the challenge of being welcomed online by the customers in their free or leisure space as discussed under digital labour. This notion of the customer accepting the brand in social media context as discussed by Fournier and Avery (2011) leads to the creation of content that appeals to the customer, and therefore this becomes a building block that leads to branding on social media as an open-source activity that invites co-creation practices. The embedding of the brand in social media can create authenticity and the analysis revealed that Flixbus indeed interacts with its customer base on both Facebook and Instagram by embracing the behaviours that welcome the customers as co-creators. For example, open questions, invitation to 'tag' friends, asking about experiences or favourite destinations by the brand to its followers creates a conversational environment.

Overall it was observed that the style of creating posts and designing the social media feeds are differentiated between Flixbus' Instagram and Facebook pages. Instagram, as discussed, relies on visual appeal without needing too much context for the understanding of images. Facebook, as a contrast, appears more approachable and communicative with the community, with a focus on the Flixbus organisation and its practices as well as travel and holidays alone. Given the importance of

online services and social media platforms as a source of travel and tourism information, there is the associated identification of several typologies for the connection of tourism and the creation of travel networks (David-Negre, Almedida-Santana, Hernández, & Moreno-Gil, 2018). The authors find that tourists are seen in an information paradigm online, and start-ups such as Airbnb or Flixbus are altering this information. The analysis of social media content found that there are new promotion and distribution strategies of tourist destinations. For Flixbus, these strategies make use of 'off the beaten path' destinations, mini-breaks and spontaneous plans.

There are also numerous ways that social media platforms can be used to communicate with the customer base and to create a conversation online. On Facebook, this type of communication is often done by inviting comments and the 'tagging' of friends and family. The difference of communication is likely due to Instagram being a highly visual platform, based on a system of 'likes' whereas Facebook is created to be interactive with a more accessible interface for commenting and interaction (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Krallman, Pelletier, & Adams, 2016). The data analysis of social media demonstrated that Flixbus' communication is in line with the expected audience on its respective platforms. The captions on Flixbus' Instagram posts are the primary way that they can communicate with their followers, whereas on Facebook they can actively invite comments to further the conversation. The interview respondents confirmed that Instagram is the platform where the user's actions are driven by the visual images and the sole act of 'liking' an image feels communicative with friends and family, especially when sharing travel experiences.

Based on this differentiation of platform styles, it is evident from the analysis that on Instagram, the most prevalent communication theme is categorised under 'open questions and invitations', with the use of phrases such as *"Tell us what's YOUR favourite spot by the coast"*, *"Comment your favourite mindful getaway spot"* and *"What do you think is the most beautiful spot on the planet"*. These types of open questions open the communication between the brand and the audience (Campos et al., 2016; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Khal, Nusair, Bilgihan, Okumus, & Cobanoglu, 2013). Furthermore, this initiates personal reflection in the users and further interest in the images with which these captions are linked. However, the analysis does indicate that these communication practices are surface level and they target rather simple, intrinsic desires of the average person. The findings reveal that Facebook as a comparison is more receptive to customer suggestions for furthering the brand and its services. This is done by asking *"Which routes do you want us to add in 2019?"*, *"We're looking forward to your suggestions!"*, *"Would you want virtual reality on your next #FlixTrip?"* and *"Comment below where you will be Flixing to next year?"*. This creates an interactive connection between Flixbus and their customers in a practical sense. Rather than focusing on the

creation of the desire to travel, Flixbus invites the customers to share and contribute to how the brand can better meet their needs. Social media makes this highly accessible.

4.2.2. Customers' Usage of Social Media

The above section discussed the findings of the analysis of social media from the perspective of branding practices and fostering an environment for co-creation. Following this, the analysis of the interview data will be discussed to consider the perspective of the consumer and their usage of social media. Previous research emphasises the role of social media for connecting customers to new sources of information, by providing a platform for the sharing of own experiences and pictures but also for developing an understanding of the 'self' (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013; Shuqair & Cragg, 2017; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). By first discussing the specific role of social media, the analysis will then follow with the collaborative activities and co-creation practices in detail later in this chapter.

The analysis found that the importance of WOM for the Flixbus brand is twofold. Firstly, the company does not rely heavily on traditional marketing techniques and has instead made strong use of the opportunities that social media offers for branding and communication, as already discussed. In addition to social media, Flixbus relies on WOM and its green branded buses that also advertise the low prices. In general, budget travel tends to have a connotation which is not associated with quality, luxury or positive experiences. As a result, for budget travel to be framed in a positive light, the element of WOM is of high importance (Campos, et al., 2016). The analysis of Flixbus specifically indicates three main WOM contexts. Firstly, WOM is important to the users in overall trip planning, experiences and values and this also covers the method of transportation to their destination (Sotiriadis, & Van Zyl, 2013). Secondly, WOM for Flixbus is a key driving factor of sharing the existence of the company with peers in a world where consumers are actively looking for new products or services less often, unless otherwise initiated (Yoo, Sanders & Moon, 2013). Thirdly, the analysis indicates that the captions on Facebook and Instagram posts can invoke sharing with peers (Appendix D). The interview respondents all agreed that the element of WOM is essential to their own experiences and the information gathering process as well as the choice of Flixbus. Respondent C stated, *"I just think its cool to go where my friend has also been in the same city so I would also ask them for any recommendations in the city"*. In the case of learning about Flixbus, three of the respondents determined that they had first heard of the service through friends, with the fourth respondent simply knowing it by being from Munich, where the company is from. Those that discovered the service through friends implied that this was the main reason they would consider the option. This is a crucial element for branding and co-creating budget travel; there is a need to

foster positive conversations about the brand and its opportunities to prevent these stereotypical assumptions of budget travel.

The analysis of the interviews further revealed that there is always the inherent desire of the user to share their travels, but this is not necessarily considered as ‘prosumerism’ externally. In the context of social media usage, the respondents considered it perfectly natural to share images of their trip with peers and family. Respondent A had recently made the choice to delete all social media services, but when asked about taking photographs during travel, the respondent confirmed *“Yeah for sure, and I send it to the family group and then friends for sure”*. It is interesting to note that respondent A automatically talked about sharing the photos, without being explicitly asked about whether they share them. Respondent B considered themselves to be cautious of the posts they share on social media. They stated that *“I will take some photos and I will post them on Instagram, but everything is very curated because I have my family on there as well”*. The cautiousness shows awareness about the sharing of posts and the experiences but also indicates that the opinions of peers and family influences behaviour, as suggested by previous research on the role of social media in travel. In the scope of this research, there is evidence of this blurred line between the experiences, the role of the individual and active participation on social media. This suggests that from beginning to end, brands that are assembled well on social media are thereby also integrated into the customer’s daily social media usage practices. This leads to a stronger presence of the brand, and Flixbus demonstrates an understanding of this by being aware of the type of content that travellers want to share by sharing user photos on Instagram and Facebook. For comparison, two images can be seen below:

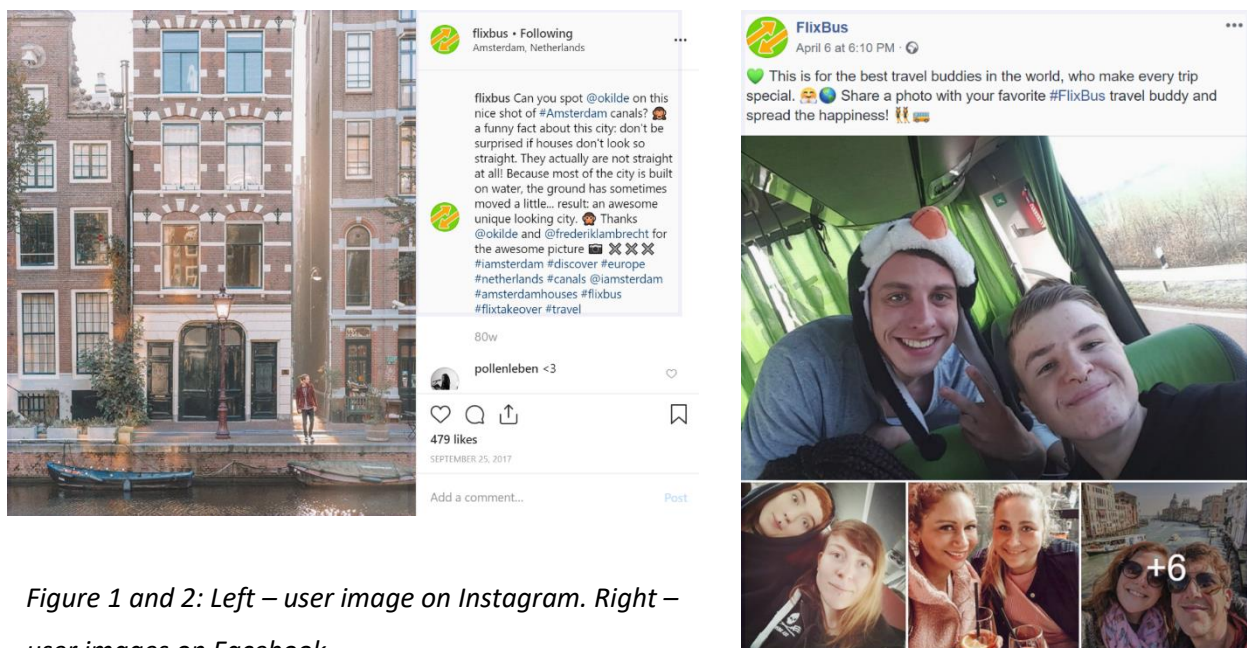


Figure 1 and 2: Left – user image on Instagram. Right – user images on Facebook.

Geo-tagging is another social media feature which is of importance to both the brand and the customer. The analysis of interviews and social media revealed that location is still the first step in the planning process of the individual, despite the other factors that influence the planning process or the motives of the customer for travelling. Geo-tagging is simply marking the location of an image – this can be the name of a country, city, street or even a commercial establishment such as a store or a café. The use of geo-tagging on social media platforms rings the user content and experiences closer to the visual image with a destination. This adds value to Flixbus as it connects their customers to the destination, but the customer can also share their geo-tagged images. Based on this finding, it can be argued that Flixbus on Instagram leverages the digitally active consumer in a way that does not only emphasise the service itself but instead the destination or experience. This supports the need for proactive brand activity on social media as argued by Campos, et al., 2016 but also demonstrates Flixbus' understanding of consumer behaviour. This embraces the sharing and WOM of the journey and travel experiences, with Flixbus being the connection point between the user from the start to the end.

4.3. Co-Creation Practices in the Collaborative Economy

The research findings and analysis of the role of values of the customer strongly support the 'triangulation of activity' of digital labour, as proposed by Fuchs and Seignani (2013). This activity is the combined results of co-creation, experiences and communication which together produce and encourage proactive digital behaviour. The cognitive labour is based on online information and profiles, the communicative is the establishment of new meaning in social relationships and finally, the co-operative digital labour is the artefacts, communities and social systems which exist. With the example of Flixbus to demonstrate co-creation of budget travel, the analysis found that the cognitive labour is the visual and textual framing of travel desires and experiences. The communication is the interaction that takes place both online and offline – commenting, sharing or 'liking' images. Finally, the co-operative digital work is the sharing of personal experiences, images and the communities that form considering the desires for social change or during the search for self-identification. This section of the paper will address the sub question of *"What are the socio-economic values and trends that give budget travel services a market advantage"*. This section will also address the core of the overall research objective to understand **the co-creation of budget travel brands and the role of the customer**.

4.3.1. Representation of Social Values

Social constructs and trends further influence how customers perceive travel, how businesses are structured, and how experiences are valued. As technology develops, there is an

increased desire for individuals to have differentiated and individualistic experiences (Phang, 2013). Brands can now use social media to mediate economic and social values in the context of tourism and travel. Instagram eases the way to share, which in turn makes it a simple way to capture social values. The social values are captured by sharing sustainable practices, new technologies, or shaping the service or sales around common practices – such as travelling ‘home’ for Christmas. Posts which encompass these social values or changes were categorised under ‘Inherent Travel Motivations and Emotions’.

The analysis demonstrates that values are reflected in images and their captions and the interview data supports the existing research and the theories on travel values by demonstrating that social values are actively considered by the traveller when discussing their experiences. However, there is a certain disconnect between consideration and actively acknowledging the role of these values. The user has a specific perception of the self in society, and this is shaped by both internal and external factors (Kim, Oh & Jogaratnam, 2007; Obeneur, 2003; Riley, 1988). By capturing the influences in a single image, when the image aligns with the user, the connect is created. Making sacrifices for travel or a general sense of feeling as if the user is missing out compared to peers also emerged as a defining factor in valuing the travel experience. In this case the value comes from others having specific experiences and not being able to participate due to financial or time restrictions. Respondent B stated the following:

Recently my group of friends went on a trip to Budapest. And I obviously didn't go (...) I had like no money whatsoever. And I was like yeah I need to save and stuff for when I go to Greece in the summer. (Interview Respondent B)

Another respondent found that their financial status is the sole defining factor of experiences: “*At the moment that's really decided by my budget, so places that I really want to go to are unfortunately not as easily reachable*” (Respondent D)

This suggests that users are inherently shaped by social changes and values and have the desire to conform to specific ideas. When these ideas are represented in a social media medium and it matches their desire for travel and exploration, then their behaviour during experiences will reflect this. Furthermore, by sharing personal images of travel, which are based on certain expectations and changes, they are affirming that these values are of importance to them when they travel and share their experiences and journeys. Overcoming social challenges such as abundance of product, pollution, economic issues and the increased cost of living also influences the co-creation practices and the branding of travel. The services which change over time and develop with these challenges

are bridging the gap from challenge to solution. With the case of Flixbus, as argued, they are passively incentivising environmentally friendly and affordable travel without using that as the sole 'selling point' of their service. Furthermore, they are providing for a part of the population that wants to fit into certain societal practices – travel, exploration of new places, escapism an alternative. Furthermore, this alternative can be more fulfilling and enriching as an experience than the standard practices that individuals are accustomed to currently.

4.3.2. The Customer as a Brand Resource

The lines between the consumer and the producer are blurred more than ever before, especially with the now common practice of business to customer interactions taking place online and on social media platforms. For understanding the extent that the customer can co-create budget travel, this research combined social media content analysis with interview findings. Using this method, there is an understanding from the perspective of the consumer and their role in co-creation and the Flixbus perspective on social media to look at the extent of using UGC or co-created values in online branding.

By presenting a context where the customer is invited to share their experiences, pictures, videos and stories, Flixbus can use the personal experiences of their travellers to further develop their service. As already argued, users are actively seeking out content and information from other travellers on social media. Furthermore, by already creating an online presence of information exchange, they are passively creating the brand's image as well. Flixbus also invites bloggers and photographers to share their Flixbus images and stories, which connects these individuals to the experience of the service, but this feeling can then translate to other customers, and to share their own experiences. The images which drive the feeling of co-creation often feature a person, as opposed to an empty landscape or cityscape. This proves that genuine users are at the destinations, participating in experiences. The prosumer trusts the content that is authentic in their personal view and is therefore more willing to produce themselves. However, the analysis found that the willingness to produce is for others and the consumers' peers, rather than directly doing it for the benefit of the brand or service itself. The travel services will be used regardless, therefore creating the appeal of the connection to the destinations has more value over knowledge of the type of service itself, especially in the earlier consideration stages. Flixbus shares posts with other content creators such as bloggers or travel photographers as well as user shared images. This is 'free labour' for the brand but the risk is that the brand does not control the content that is being created. By using collaborative content, the company can suggest the type of experience that consumers can expect to have when using Flixbus. This limits the brand from trying to dictate the conversation and

fabricate unrealistic expectations. The analysis found that the result of this is an overall positive brand image where co-creation is genuine and trustworthy, and it also encourages future prosumer behaviour.

4.3.3. Co-Creating Budget Travel

Conceptualising the elements of budget travel branding in this research is demonstrated with the example of Flixbus as a case study. Using Flixbus as an example brand and its current position on the market, the opportunities and successes of branding and co-creating budget travel can be assessed. This theme emerged during the analysis process to play a significant role in understanding the co-creation of budget travel. Understanding Flixbus specifically can shed insight into branding and communication practices as well as how customers desire to co-create for a travel brand. There is a specific style and approach to the Flixbus experience on social media, which has been discussed in the previous sections. The Instagram feed for Flixbus does not rely on its signature colours and logos to visually frame travel with the Flixbus brand. On Facebook, the branding is much more evident, especially with the presence of a profile picture in the signature colours of green and orange. However, there are also smaller nuances which capture the co-creation and the UGC. Hatch and Schultz (2010) discuss how the series of 'encounters' that the customer has with the brand is how the relationship is defined. The analysis of data revealed that on Facebook, these encounters are in the form of comments, stories or news about the service. The encounters are continuously being developed as Flixbus continues to expand its service and widen its network. With the current growing expansion of Flixbus and connecting cities in the United States, the company is already beginning to embed itself into American socio-cultural values. For instance, the musical festival 'Coachella' which takes place in California is a hugely popular summer event each year. Flixbus only entered the American Market in early 2018, a year later, it was able to integrate into the experiences by connecting nearby cities with the festival. This strategy further supports the notion of co-creation and involvement of the customers in co-creating travel and destination value through memorable experiences (Scharkey, 2019).

Another factor found through the coding process is the underlying common thread of the Flixbus brand personality. In order to do this, it was found that on Facebook, Flixbus shares the stories of its drivers with the use of "FlixFamily" and "FlixLove" to share positive Flixbus interactions, "FlixStories" to share unique Flixbus related stories or interactions and "FlixFans" to highlight the company's active fans. This creates a very specific Flixbus community but also actively guides the Flixbus branding narrative. By making users and potential customers feel close to the #FlixFamily, there could be a certain appeal to a different type of user. Whereas the analysis showed that on

Instagram users are visually guided but also sceptical of brand curated content compared to that of peers, Facebook has more of an interactive appeal. The difference of Facebook could appeal to an older demographic of users, therefore widening the potential customer base.

Travel trends are ever-changing and keeping up with the customer desires, the brands and services should be aware of these changes. Flixbus' social media analysis indicates through the 'destinations and physical locations' theme that there is a variety of cities, countries and specific physical destinations that are shared as a part of their network. Some instances are of smaller, unknown places or 'hidden gems'. Furthermore, this reflects the trend of the next generation traveller who wants to be an explorer, rather than a tourist. A traveller who is interested in the co-creation and active participation in shaping low budget travel overall, not just as a digital labourer. A report on 2018 travel trends (ABTA, 2018) highlighted the rise of responsible tourism, alternative destinations and a new type of luxury escapism in the form of luxury, high-quality rail travel. These trends are in line with the posts on Instagram – advertising winter destinations, solitude, 'off the beaten path' and quirky bookshops

These findings on the brand of Flixbus, its social media practices and the opportunities of co-creation it offers, therefore, could serve as excellent guidance for branding budget travel. There are numerous opportunities as indicated by the analysis; the difference in platforms, vast travel network with affordable prices that creates its value for a travel experience. The most important factors for co-creating a travel budget brand as suggested by the analysis are as follows; reactive posts to the travel desires of the individuals, framing budget travel in a new light that is not associated with 'cheapness' or limitations and finally the active engagement of the users through sharing images, stories and experiences. The element of sharing can take place both online and offline and it can have further influence on the interactions and relationships of users with their peers and family. Dredge and Gyimóthy (2015) found that there was not enough evidence for the benefits of the user in a collaborative economy, instead the movement is driven by businesses. This research has found that co-creating budget travel entails both customer benefits and business benefits. Firstly, the branding of budget travel can be done through co-creation and encouraging prosumer behaviour. This leads to a more authentic perception of the brand and the shaping of experiences and desires that attract more customers. Secondly, the customer benefits in affordable and accessible experiences, the 'feel good' value of participating in a shared and sustainable practices and the feeling of belonging and a sense of purpose. The sense of purpose can be through connecting with friends and other travellers or to feel acknowledged by the brand in co-creating value and experiences.

4.3.4. Financial Motives of the Customer

Economic interests of the individual generally have the most influence on the decision of consumers. From the very beginning of the decision-making process, the financial position automatically adds or removes certain choices. For travel, the highest costs are associated with the mode of transportation and accommodation. However, this does not necessarily imply that the high or low cost equates to equal quality of the trip. The analysis of the Flixbus example has demonstrated that budget travel can also be co-created in a manner which emphasises the customer, the journey, the experiences and the values that are to be gained from the travel, rather than the focus on amenities. Furthermore, budget travel increases the inclusiveness and access to the co-created experiences, which is also often a social challenge, as discussed above.

Budget airlines nowadays are notorious for hidden fees or added fees for luggage, choosing a seat, priority boarding, and often based at remote airports. In addition to the ticket prices, reaching specific departure points for transportation can also be a hindrance or result in added costs. The interviews suggest that the traveller has a pre-framed expectation for which type of journey and experience they are willing to invest more in, and which they accept on a budget – if at all. One respondent emphasised that comfort is essential:

In general I don't like travelling for cheap or on the cheap. I like to travel and make some sort of comfort. That does guide my decision if there is the option of a shorter trip that's more expensive and more comfortable I will pay for that. (Interview respondent B)

As a contrast, interview respondent A said *"I think during the summer and during the Christmas break I don't care how much it costs. I don't know why. Maybe because I don't have anything else to do in that time"*. Overall, the interview data suggests that for short distance travel, sacrifices can be made but for long distance, there is a natural desire to invest in comfortable services. It was expected that long-distance journeys across the globe justify investment in the comfort of an aeroplane, as well as added amenities such as meal service or entertainment systems. However, for short to mid-distance travel, the interviews confirm that the budget options often prove to provide for a better experience and overall meet the spontaneous intrinsic desires.

Flixbus' strategy is strongly based on providing affordability and accessibility of travel. There are frequent social media posts on sales, promotions and the affordability of journeys. The analysis shows that the economic concerns which consumers have can be shaped as an opportunity, rather than a restriction. Riley (1988) discusses the budget traveller as the individuals who desire extended travels beyond the scope of a 'holiday'. This implies that the use of travel when the opportunity is

still available and when the consumer's current moment in life encourages true freedom. One of the interviews suggested that this type of freedom took place during their bachelor's studies. To respondent A, this meant that the use of Flixbus was frequent: *"almost every second weekend because there was a bus that I'm a big snowboarder took us to the mountain or we went to Prague because it was 5 euros"*. For respondent B:

So we took the Flixbus overnight and we woke up in Paris. like that was so cool. I think that's one of the coolest things I've ever done. I also really that I had a sense of freedom and. Yeah just doing what I want and not being restricted by something. (Interview respondent B).

It is argued that there is a sense of fulfilment from travelling beyond the standard modern tourism framework of repetitive, recreational breaks (Riley, 1988). The analysis findings further align with the theories on the desires of the modern traveller who does not want to be a 'tourist' but to 'explore' moreover, the social values are in support of authentic experiences rather than a commercialised commodity (Cavagnaro, Staffieri & Postma, 2017; Kim, Oh & Jogaratnam, 2007; Obeneur, 2003).

Another impact of financial values is through sales and promotions, which are often shared around holidays or events such as Christmas, St. Patrick's Day or Carnival (See Appendix C) which enables the consumer to participate, to experience and this, in turn, results in value-added for Flixbus. Their service will, therefore, be associated with opportunities to travel, rather than being associated with 'budget alternative'. This continuous shift towards budget and still having equal variety and differentiation to explore and to travel is essential for shifting the societal assumptions about the high cost being necessary for experiences and luxuries. It can also be understood that by opting for budget choices, the number of trips or destinations can also be increased for the cost of a single trip. Kim, Oh and Jogaratnam (2007) discuss the concerns over travel products that are not in line with the student-aged travelling group. Namely, the limited finances but also a specific desire to have a 'lifestyle' experience. Flixbus presents the experiences that the customer can have as a local, which contributes to the lifestyle experience. This extends to knowledge and adventure when abroad but does not face financial limitations.

4.4. Travel Consumption Experience

This section of the results and analysis section will focus on the way that the travel experience is conceptualised, and to create an understanding of the values and the choices that the consumer desires. The analysis of the interviews and social media content can be grouped into the following main categories; the travel experiences and the creation of 'wanderlust'. Using these

theoretical concepts, the research sub-question of “*What are the values, experiences and perceptions that the customer desires from their journey?*” can be addressed.

4.4.1. Travel Experience

Conceptualising the travel experience is one of the most important factors for understanding consumer values in tourism. The most notable components to the travel experience are the choice of destination (Leung et al., 2013) and the desired experiences from the travel (Phang, 2013). The choice of the destination is a delicate balance of the push and the pull, with the former being the intrinsic motivations of the individuals and the latter the external justification of choice (Bello & Etzel, 1985; Riley, 1988; Xu, Morgan, & Song, 2009). The analysis of interviews suggests that the causal traveller is aware of the push and pull factors but the desire to travel begins with the push, rather than the pull. This is important because it supports the previous research of Riley (1988) which argues that the push to travel is influenced by the characteristics of the individual and their current position in life and society. This research found that there is a difference between the users’ travel habits as students compared to their travel habits as working adults – supporting the idea of the situational factors. Furthermore, Xu, Morgan and Song (2006) found that in most cases, the push is the result of escapism and the desire for new experiences. The interviews conducted for this research also indicate that the desire to travel can be invoked in different ways in the individual. The role of curating the budget travel experience, therefore, should reflect an awareness of these factors.

The analysis conducted found that the notions of push and pull are created by both the user and the brand. From the user side, there is a sense of desire and the push factors whereas the brand side leverages the pull and the visual framing of these desires on social media. The findings of this research support the existing research into these concepts. By framing the travel experience to tempt the internal feelings of the individual such as the desire to relax, escape or to develop the self, the travel experience is focused on the customer desires. When the focus is on the destination itself; appealing nature or cityscapes, culture, history or monuments, the travel experience is based on the physical experiences which are available to consumers. The coding of social media images and interviews revealed two main themes; ‘destinations and physical locations to discover’ and ‘inherent travel motivations and emotions’ to be of the highest frequency in assessing the travel experience. Based on the understanding of and findings of the co-creation practices as discussed earlier, the pushes and pulls are what shape the way in which co-creation is done.

Traveller values, as argued, are key to branding a travel service or product. The way that experiences are valued is highly dependent on the destination, the personality of the traveller and

the approach that is taken for the travel plan and holiday formation. The experiences and motivations are strongly embedded in the overall consumption process, including social and physical interactions. Therefore, unlike the choice of destination, the experience is not solely in the control of the customer (Holt, 1995). Instead, the customer participates in an experience which was an underlying motivation or benefit. The analysis of social media posts in combination with the interviews indicate that personal growth and development, friendships, relaxation, freedom and spontaneity of travel are core motivators. One interview stated:

I mean destination itself doesn't really matter as much to me. It's more the experience of something, experiencing different people, different cultures and kind of just adopting to what they, what a local would do basically and do the same thing. Just see, how it's different.
(Interview Respondent D)

Similar sentiments were expressed by the other interview respondents and this was coded under the 'inherent travel motivations and emotions' theme. These are intrinsic motivations of the traveller which guide their choices of destination and experiences. These motivations can also impact the relationship that the user has with the brand. As already argued, the analysis demonstrates that Flixbus is strongly associated with social media platforms and intertwining the brand services into different parts of the consumer's decision-making and purchasing processes.

4.4.2. Flixbus and the Creation of 'Wanderlust'

Travel and tourism have often been contextualised with an element of romanticism and wanderlust (Holbrook & Olney, 1995). In branding a travel product and experience, the analysis shows that especially on social media, the use of language plays a significant role in framing the appeal of destinations, the 'feel' of the experience and the personality of the cities. On Flixbus' Instagram there are numerous photos which by the caption suggest what the attraction of the physical destination is. For example; *"Macedonia has an air of mystery that makes this mountainous, off the beaten path country truly an intriguing destination of discovery"*. This caption targets the curiosity of the traveller, it adds the mystery of nature and the appeal of the 'off the beaten path'. The research has found that this idea of uniqueness tends to reflect the overall values of the young and spontaneous traveller.

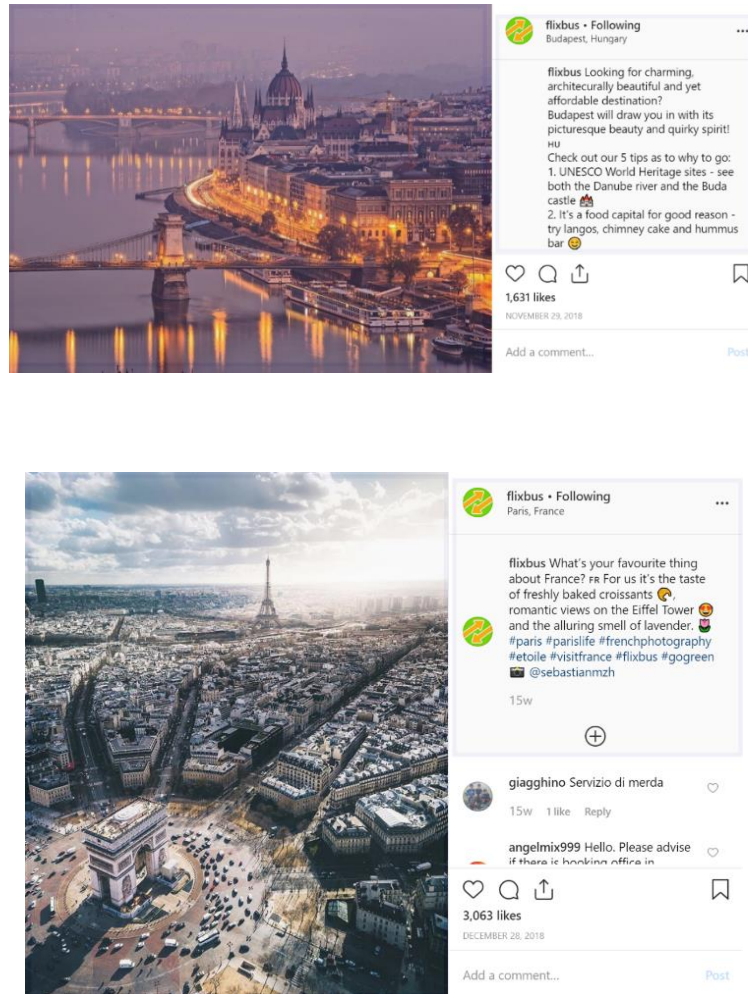


Figure 3 and 4: Capturing Travel Desires on Instagram

Above, there are two examples of typical posts of Flixbus' Instagram, promoting destinations with this type of romanticism and unique appeal. The language strongly emphasizes the physical location and the attributes it has to offer, with the possibility of capturing the travel styles of different individuals. These images are often used by Flixbus to present the visual appeal of a destination but without imposing a specific type of travel or tourism style or narrative. This leaves the attraction of the destination open to interpretation by the customer – factors such as the climate, geographic location, physical features, historical value and so forth.

The notion of spontaneity of travel was uncovered in the social media content analysis through thematic coding. In the images, this is suggested by posts which capture the push motives; adventure, discovery and exploring. The common suggestions are to 'experience' with descriptive terms such as 'authentic atmosphere', 'alpine views and shimmering clear lakes but much less crowded' and 'adventurous hikes' (see appendix C for examples). The interview respondents also reflect that affordability and easy access to the Flixbus service allows for me spontaneity and impulse decisions. Respondent A stated that one of their (personal) three types of travel is "when it's

just super spontaneous and I get an e-mail from Wizzair or whatever like Flixbus that yeah you can get this ticket for five euro and I buy it". Respondent C said *"So we decided let's go to Paris and we checked the trains and the trains were super expensive and the Flixbus was 11 euros! Eleven! And it was six hours!"*. The interview findings suggest that the customers have certain spontaneous desires that are best met by an affordable option. This behaviour can also indicate the type of experience or travel that the consumers will expect from the Flixbus service.

The analysis further demonstrates that travellers who enjoy travel and new experiences for the sake of the experience, rather than seeking a holiday are directly more motivated by novelty. Bello and Etzel (1985) found that users who have positive novelty travel experiences desire this from a new destination in the future. In the scope of co-creating a brand, the novelty element is of high importance to realising the full potential of available experiences. Respondent A recalls an unexpected purchase of a ticket when inebriated *"so we ended up going to Thailand for three weeks because we bought a ticket. So yeah that was pretty fun"*. Interestingly, the interviews also indicated that the user does not want to be considered as a 'tourist'. For example, respondent C said, *"I don't want anyone to know that I'm a tourist so when I'm going to Paris, I also have my Paris outfit (...) I also smoked a lot because French women smoke in my head so..."*. This aligns with the customer envision their destination and experience, and the search for a travel brand which can mirror this image (Campos, et al., 2016; McCarthy, Stock & Verma, 2010). Flixbus uses this idea of the imagined self and wanderlust to show a range of travel experiences and opportunities. Because these ideas are often co-created by the consumers, they are considered as authentic, realistic and the Flixbus service is affordable and accessible to anyone.

4.4.3. Encouraging Sustainable Travel Values

Sustainability is something which is not directly essential to the co-creation of budget travel. However, it is an important factor for the future of transportation and tourism. Sustainable practices is a widespread and growing concern which is impacting different industry sectors (Niezgoda, 2013; Petrini, Freitas & Silveira, 2017; Winston, 2018). The analysis of social media and interviews provided for an interesting understanding of the perception of sustainability in the individual's travel choices as well as how Flixbus, as an example, uses this in their branding. Therefore the discussion of the findings on sustainability are included due to the fact that they have a passive impact on the travel behaviours and values, which in turn does impact co-creation in the sense that environmentally conscious travellers can encourage others to understand the value of this practice whilst the service can brand itself as more 'sustainable' to appeal to a wider customer base.

By analysing social media platforms, it was found that Flixbus uses the factor of sustainability to complement its services. In addition to the appeal of travel, attractive destinations and affordability, there is the value-added of using a shared transport system which is more sustainable than flying or just two people taking a road trip. In order to mitigate the negative image that travel has regarding environmentally friendly behaviour, Flixbus frames their service to accommodate the same types of fun that the traveller would have with a friend on a road trip as an example (appendix D). Furthermore, their Facebook posts emphasise the ease of using their coach services, the possibility to take an overnight trip to sleep on the coach and to arrive at the destination in the morning or the offering of some long-distance electric busses. The appeal of choosing shared transportation method is framed within the appeal of cost and time efficiency, the two factors which traditionally are considered to be prohibitive to sustainable behaviour. This finding shows that budget travel can attract the customer with one set of benefits, and as a result, the customer emerges from the experience with a sense of making socially conscious and sustainable choices.

In line with previous research of environmentally sustainable behaviour in travel practices (Hoppe, Jungmeier, Nilsson, McDonald, 2014; Prillwitz & Barr, 2011), the interviews also demonstrated that despite sustainable actions being of some importance in day to day lives, travelling was not highly considered in the scope of mindfulness by travellers. On the one hand, respondent A stated:

It happened before that I told you that I took a train or bus instead of a train or instead of a plane but because the overall waiting seemed to be less. But I think when I travel I don't really consider sustainability unfortunately. (Interview respondent A).

Another respondent thought that sustainability in travel only works for short distance trips and *that "I'm definitely still a little bit of a phony right now because I'm planning massive trips..."* (Respondent C). On the other hand, the content analysis found that Flixbus on social media encourages sustainable behaviour through associating these practices with their service. One post encouraged the followers to share what they do to protect the planet, to participate in #GoGreenChallenge and in return have the chance to win a sum of money for green travels with Flixbus. Another example is from Facebook to motivate the choice of Flixbus; eco-friendly travel, savings, effective time use, flexibility, broad network and night buses.

Therefore, by producing an attractive service which can result in positive social practices by encouraging co-creation, Flixbus remains receptive to the socio-economic trends. Environmentally friendly practices affect the tourism and transport market but are not easy to accommodate without

affecting business goals. Hamari, Sjöklint and Ukkonen (2016) discuss the attitudes that affect consumer behaviour in the context of sustainable practices. Namely that pursuing sustainable behaviour, cost, lack of means and on a superficial level – lack of recognition of green practices can be a hindrance. The authors indicate that users are likely more inclined to behave sustainably when their peers reflect this behaviour too. The analysis suggests that this attitude and behaviour gap needs a different type of approach. For constructing budget travel, the added benefit of sustainability can assist in overcoming the attitude-behaviour gaps that are still prevalent and lead to an inside-out transformation of individualistic practices and attitudes.

4.5. Main Findings

This chapter presented the findings of the research as guided by existing theories and concepts. The main research objective of understanding the role of the customer in co-creating budget travel is seen from multiple perspectives. There is a general overlap between the different theoretical concepts, the findings of the interviews and the data which emerged from the social media content analysis. The customer seemingly has a leading role in the values and desires that are assigned to travel. The case study of Flixbus as an example demonstrates that there is brand awareness of the role of the customer. On social media platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, the brand creates both a visual and emotional representation of the traveller values for others to see, and to create a 'conversation' of sharing online.

The findings of the research determine that due to the difficulties that surround the separation of leisure time and productive time online, and the integration of social media into both entertainment and purchase-decision making processes, the consumer is always co-creating travel in one form or another. This is most often seen simply in the act of travel alone, as this leads to image sharing, geo-tagging and WOM. From the brand perspective, embracing the authentic experiences of different individuals and providing new travel opportunities leads to proactive consumers.

Flixbus on social media is not branding its service alone, it is branding the experiences, values and journeys that the consumer can access by making the purchase decision of a coach ticket. These elements are seen in the three sub-questions of the research objective. The importance of consumer values is emphasised by both co-creation of content from travellers and the reflection of proactive consumers on social media by Flixbus. Combining experience, online conversations and the sharing of media leads to a digital labour environment which continues to influence businesses and individuals.

5. Conclusion

This research paper set out to investigate the extent of the customer involvement in co-creation of budget travel brands by looking at the case of the coach service Flixbus. This research evolved from the growing societal trends and shifts in travel and the value experiences of the journey. This research objective was investigated from socio-economic values, the desires and travel behaviours of the customer and finally, the way that social media can be used to reflect these values and desires. The findings present a triangulation of activity, based on Fuchs and Sevignani's (2013) concept of digital labour. The activities of the consumer are the result of co-creation activities, the sharing of experiences and communication practices. The confirmation of this triangulation of activity thereby answers the research question of to what extent does the customer play a role in the co-creation of budget travel? The customer plays an essential role in bringing together the online activities of brands, other users and the personal values of the individual. Budget travel services as a result are shaped by the process of value development and the act of travel as function of co-creation.

Travellers are more than ever valuing new, individualistic experiences that further the identity of the self. Cyclical vacations have been replaced by impulse weekend trips and affordable last-minute tickets. Social media drives the thirst for travel and formulates travel experiences in a new light. The value of the customer in travel experiences is becoming increasingly important for co-creating true and authentic experiences. Embracing these changes, values and trends in branding budget travel is necessary for shaping the new and current position of travel in everyday life. Furthermore, the use of platforms and role of social media should not be undermined in developing new travel practices.

Regarding travel consumption and experiences, this research found that travel can be considered as especially casual and often a spontaneous activity when situated in a well-connected travel network with a choice of service providers. With the Flixbus example, it became evident that there is a unique appeal to its affordability and the access that it provides to almost anyone. Flixbus has removed the 'restrictions' that may be associated with travel and instead framed their business on accessibility, presence and opportunities. This view of the brand has been achieved by involving the customer in co-creating practices. McCarthy, Stock and Verma (2010) determined that social media should be a new distribution channel which changes how travellers determine their stay but also as a way for organisations to interact with their customers and to refine their brand accordingly. This research found this role of social media to be accurate. However, it was found that users are co-creating travel experiences passively. This means that they are not necessarily setting out to support the brand, but instead they use the service and share the experiences with peers. This does generate

positive WOM for Flixbus, but it is the result of deeper, intrinsic and often selfish consumerist desires.

Branding budget travel on social media through co-creation practices according to previous research emphasises the appeal of the destination and the branding of specific locations (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Burgess, Cox, & Buultjens, 2009; Campos, et al., 2016; France, Merrilees, & Miller, 2015; Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2013). This research found that branding travel services on social media does not have to have the goal of selling the ticket. Instead, using co-creation and its customers, the brand can sell you the possibility of experiences and to be the source of information for others. Specifically, the modern traveller wants to explore, to have unique and individualistic experiences (Phang, 2013). These experiences are sought out often on social media, either impulsively or by images that tempt the user. The research found that Flixbus actively reflects the ideas of escapism, exploring and 'off the beaten path' travel values, which is the result of customers actively participating on social media with the brand or with one another.

Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) found that digital labour consumes the online activities of individuals. There is no longer a distinction between producing online and 'leisure' online. Instead many activities can produce or be a form of labour in one way or another. The analysis of interviews in this research aligned with this theory – simply by browsing Instagram or Facebook for entertainment, the user is exposed to new images, either from brands or peers and this invokes a desire to travel, to plan, to purchase or to consume. When the user is travelling, they see it as a part of the travel process to share images, which becomes 'free labour' for brands and services. There are no clear boundaries between using and producing online, and this mindset is evident in the shaping and valuation of experiences.

Given the exploratory nature of this research, the significance of the findings is rooted in the numerous interesting directions to take the future of budget travel branding and the involvement of the consumer in co-creation practices. Most importantly, it is determined that brands curating travel experiences thus far have not actively included the customer in the process. Instead, the experience has been curated by the brand for the customer. With this approach, there is a disconnect between the desires of the consumer and the way that the service or brand can connect with their users. This leaves potential to develop travel brands that further emphasise the role of the prosumer and as a result, can provide for even more authentic but individualistic experiences. This could be combined with other technological platforms beyond social media to create a stronger overview of the individual.

Existing theories and research analyse the traditional travel values and the push and pull motivations of the individual. However, these are analysed in a more general sense, without a

specific service as a practical example. Furthermore, there is research into usage of social media for travel, but often this research focuses specifically on destination branding, rather than service branding. Finally, there is a need for more mixed methodological approaches that make use of complimentary sets of data to create a multi-dimensional understanding of the processes. This exploratory research has resulted in some key findings about the views of the traveller and the role that they play in co-creating a brand. Furthermore, there are specific trends and social values that influence how a service can be considered in the overall purchase-decision making process (Hudson & Thal, 2013). This research supports the direction that travel trends are shifting towards – personalisation, accessibility, individualisation. Furthermore, by using social media as a central component in gathering information, purchasing and communicating, anyone can be involved, and the different types of co-created experiences are numerous.

The insights gained from this research can be used to further develop the individual values of the customer as well as to assess modern usage of social media. Furthermore, the example of Flixbus in branding and co-creation is a relatively unique research perspective. This suggests that other travel brands can be researched in a similar, exploratory manner.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

This research has provided for new perspectives on the role of the customer in co-creating budget travel, and the role of social media in this process. However, some limitations to consider are that the understanding of Flixbus' social media content was based on a qualitative analysis of their Instagram and Facebook posts. Despite the rigorous and carefully considered coding and analysis process, the process is nevertheless subjective to an extent. Another limitation to consider is the number of interviews conducted. Although in-depth interviews provide for interesting data and flexible discussion, they are time consuming and the number of interviews is not enough to make a generalised profile of Flixbus users. This research also analysed Facebook and Instagram, excluding Twitter and Snapchat from the social media content analysis. This could affect the general understanding of the branding of Flixbus on social media. Finally, using only one company as a practical case study does limit the generalisability of the findings to other travel brands or services. Nevertheless, there is the opportunity to use the findings of this research as general guide.

For developing a further understanding of co-creating budget travel, further research could be conducted both qualitatively and quantitatively on the travel experiences, values and patterns of Flixbus or budget travellers in general. This could serve to provide a modern understanding of the traveller, and how their preferences and values influence the availability and opportunities of services. This research could be expanded by practical and first-hand knowledge of Flixbus' social

media and communication strategy. By developing the different traveller profiles and contrasting this with Flixbus' social media strategy, a general application of the budget social media branding strategies could be created.

Another possible area of research to consider is the analysis of 'travelgrams' and the social media usage behaviour of individuals. Current research suggests that there may be a connection of the user searching for a specific type of image or experience online. However, it is also possible that all co-created experiences, information gained from (e)WOM and images shared by peers have an equal weight in the general travel motivations. This insight would be useful for brands and services looking to curate travel experiences online. By understanding if there is an equal playing field of information or whether there is a certain personal bias of the user would offer the opportunities of further, more individualistic and personalised service providers on social media.

This research used the opportunity to explore the changing nature of travel, the role of the consumer and the social media component in branding budget travel. By using Flixbus as a case study to understand the practicalities of social media content curation whilst using existing research as the theoretical framework, there is evidence that the customer as a traveller is already a type of co-creation for budget travel. This relatively unique and new role of the customer in curating travel experiences provides for a new approach to understanding co-creation of travel.

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Appendices

Appendix A Overview of Interview Respondents

Respondent ID	Age	Gender	Education	Nationality	Occupation	Travel Style
A	24	Male	Master's	Hungarian	User Interface Designer	Frequent, Spontaneous, Adventurous
B	23	Male	Bachelor's	Zimbabwe	Research Analyst and Student	Infrequent, Comfortable, Highly Planned
C	26	Female	Master's	German	Social Media Expert	Frequent, Spontaneous, City-trips Luxury
D	29	Male	Bachelor's	Austrian	Customer Service Expert and Student	Infrequent, Budget, Casual

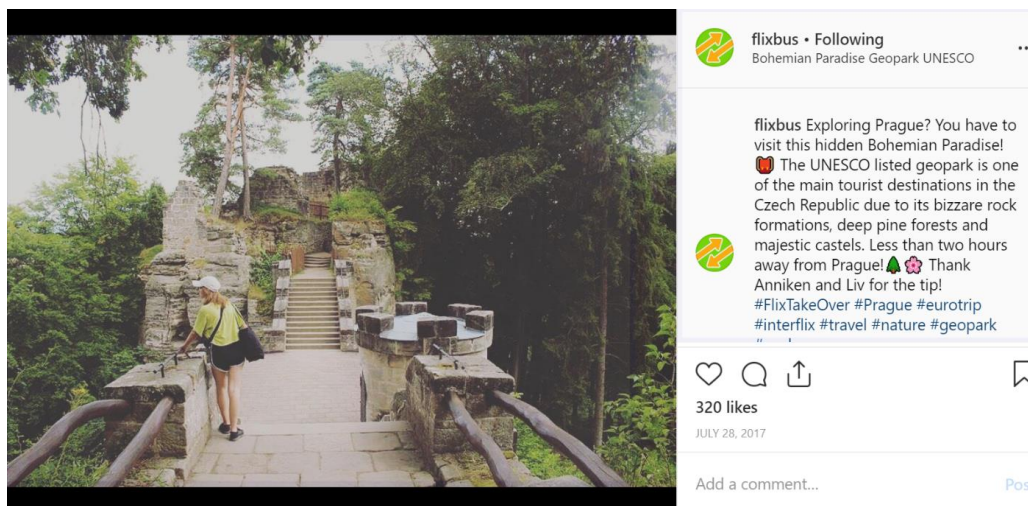
Appendix B Interview Guide

Interview guide: Co-creating budget travel brands

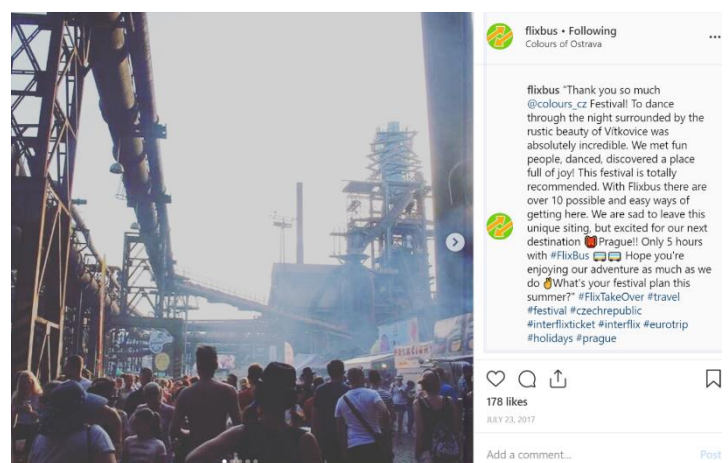
- 1. General Qs about the participant (age/nationality/profession/interests)**
- 2. Travel interests:**
 - What is your travel 'push': internal factors such as relaxation, exploration, social interaction, enhancement of kinship.
 - What's your travel 'pull': Attraction of the destination; climate, scenery, history, other unique characteristics.
 - What kind of experiences do you seek from travel?
 - Are you a planner or do you go with the flow?
 - What factors are most important to you when you plan a trip? What's something you never think about or care about?
 - Do you consider the journey as an important part of your travel? Or do you only focus on the destination?
 - What's your favourite travel story? What's been most memorable?
- 3. Sustainability:**
 - How much do you take sustainability into consideration when planning travel?
 - Do you think it is possible to be a sustainable traveller?
 - What are some limitations of putting sustainability before your travel choices?
 - Do you think the future of travel and tourism will be more sustainability oriented, even if it entails financial or time loss?
- 4. Sharing**
 - How much do you share of your travel on SM? For example, pictures or statuses? Do you ever tag the locations or companies/services you used?
 - What are your thoughts on travellers/friends that share every detail/location in depth?
 - Do you account your travel stories happily to friends/family afterwards? Or do you see it as something personal or that everyone has their own experience and story and thus you don't want to influence it?
 - Passive C2C? Do you ever see someone else share a trip/destination and you think 'I want to do that too' or you envision yourself in their place? Fear of missing out (FOMO)?
- 5. Flixbus:**
 - Where or how did you first hear about Flixbus?
 - Have you told your friends or family about the service?
 - What kind of trips have you taken with the service? Have they been spontaneous?
 - What's the appeal of Flixbus to you, if at all?
 - What was your favourite or most memorable Flixbus experience – either positive or negative?
 - Do you follow Flixbus on any social media pages? Have you ever looked at their Instagram page for example? (Offer to show example). Any thoughts on how it is curated?
 - In general, do you follow any travel companies/brands on social media?
 - When would you choose a budget airline, rail or bus?
 - WOM – thoughts? Do you think modern C2C WOM online plays a role in your travel service choices/planning?

Appendix C Instagram Content Examples

Examples of push motives:



Examples of new experiences and destinations:



Appendix D Facebook Content Examples



Appendix E Codebook

Theme	Category	Open Codes
Destinations and physical locations to discover	Cities and Countries Monuments and Physical Descriptors Nature: Water/Forests/Mountains/Seaside	Churches Cities Cityscapes Climate factors Countries Countryside Eastern Europe Famous Festivals and concerts Holiday markets Luxury Mountains Museums Nature New New destinations Off-season destinations Old Renowned Romantic Trips Scenery Snow Snow Statues Streets Sunshine Touristic Villages Water/Lakes/Rivers/Seas Western Europe Winter
Inherent travel motivations and emotions	Activities: culinary, shopping, sports, leisure Internal Values: Escapism, Relaxation, Discovery External Values: Bucket List, Peers, Hot spots Spontaneity, Positive Associations, "Wanderlust" Self-identity	Active Activities Adventures Authenticity Community Digital Detox Discovering Discovery of the self Drinking Culture Eating Escaping everyday realities Excitement Exclusive experiences Fear of missing out Flexibility Hiking

		Holiday-making Travelling as an investment Leisure behaviour Leisure activities Multitasking Negative experiences New experiences Off the beaten path Peer guidance Personal values Personality Positive Experiences Professional goals Retreat Skiing Social pressure Social values Socio-demographic factors Spontaneous Decisions Sporting Stories about friends Travelling for family Travelling for novelty Travelling with friends Value-added
Communication techniques for branding	Promotions and Sales Invitation for Recommendations Shared Content Shared Experiences	Announcements Brand Refinement Conversations Engagement with customers Female/male figure in images Humorous posts Invitation to share News Online brand community Open questions Recommendations Relationships Sharing of experiences Sharing of images Sponsored Posts Travel guides Travel tips Travelgram styling UGC Use of emojis WOM
Social media techniques and activities – customer/brand	Connecting to Peers/Family Ease of Access	Aligning interests Brand audience of Facebook

	Collaborating with Creators/Sponsored Content Shared stories	Brand audience on Instagram Consistency Customer engagement Events Identification with the brand Incorporation of user suggestions Online Conversations with the brand Posting frequency Sharing on SM Social media strategy Travel Blogs
Budget travel/Flixbus features	Affordability Trends Short-mid Distance Travel Appealing to Student Life	Access to departure points Access to services Budgeting Country expansions Electric Busses Flix stories/trips Flixbus branding Flixbus employees/organisation Flixbus experience Flixbus network FlixTrain Green Mobility Hotel alternatives Limitation of choices Limitations New opportunities Overnight sleep on the bus Prize draws Promotions and Discounts Route expansions Sales Student holidays Sustainability Time flexibility Time-distance consideration Travel trends