Travelers Break through the Noise!

Brand Identity Expressions through UGC and Young Adults' Perceptions of the Brand Image of Travel Cybermediaries

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Abstract

In this time and age, with the emergence of social media, the communication patterns between consumers and brands have changed considerably. The new form of consumer-brand relationship indicates a shift of power from the organization to the customer. Branding has become an open source activity, where consumers have a say in the matters of the brand by participating in the co-creation of brand value through user-generated content (UGC). In this new branding landscape, numerous brands leverage UGC by urging their audiences to create brand-related content and by reposting it on social media. In particular, travel cybermediaries, especially Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK, are reposting UGC on their Instagram accounts regularly.

Taking into consideration the above, this research aims to investigate how UGC is part of the branding processes of travel cybermediaries and how it is perceived by young adults (25-34 years old). Specifically, the study investigates the topic from two different perspectives, from the travel cybermediaries' and young adults' angle, in order for the results to provide a more complete and rounded insight on the topic. The ways in which travel cybermediaries (Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK) express their brand identities through UGC on Instagram as well as how their brand images are perceived by young adults are explored. In order to provide an answer to the respective sub-questions, a mix of qualitative methods, that of content analysis and in-depth interviews are implemented.

Through thematic analysis, two overarching themes emerged from the examination of Instagram posts. Travel cybermediaries seem to promote their engaged orientation and their dynamic features and expressions to reflect their brand identity through UGC. By conducting and analyzing interviews, young adults appear to attach experiential and functional benefits to the brands, while they feel an intimate connection to the brand identities. These core categories and their subcategories proved to be interrelated as young adults were found to perceive the brand images of

travel cybermediaries in the same way that they express their brand identities through UGC on Instagram.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"The thing that actually breaks through all of the noise is when you see real users sharing real content on social media"- Dom Garrett (2016)

1.1. Research problem

In this time and age, the emergence of social media has transformed many marketing activities including branding. Despite the fact that its fundamental principles have remained intact, communication patterns between consumers and brands have changed considerably. One of the primary changes, that the quote above also indicates, is a shift of power from the organization to the customer, suggesting a new form of consumer-brand relationship (Bernoff & Li 2008; Bruce & Solomon 2013; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Kaul & Chaudhri, 2017; Labrecque, vor dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013). In this new landscape, marketing literature views branding as an ongoing social process, where brand value is co-created between the firm and the consumers, through network relationships and social interactions (Merz, Yi & Vargo, 2009). In other words, branding has become an open source activity, where consumers have a say in the matters of the brand while companies have arguably lost full control (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Nevertheless, Carah (2015) argues that, despite the increasing power of consumers, brands depend less on them as co-participants in the creation of specific brand meanings and more in their capacity to act under the guidance of companies

The shift of control from marketers to consumers has also been observed in the leisure and hospitality sector. Nowadays, users are posting content before, during and after their trip. This user-generated content (UGC) has helped travel-related companies to engage potential guests, boost their online presence, and, hence, lead to greater online revenues (Leung, Law, Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). On top, UGC has also been a substantial source of strategic information which can be used for developing numerous business strategies as well as for understanding and responding to consumer preferences (Dellarocas , 2003; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Additionally, social media had a significant impact on the travel distribution system. The availability of information has forced travel agencies to adapt to a more digital model. In the same vein, travel cybermediaries have emerged, connecting suppliers

and travelers through their digital platforms, offering self-service booking options and more experience-based and personalized vacation solutions.

The term "travel cybermediaries" was first used by O'Brien (1998) who investigated the disintermediation effects of electronic commerce on retail travel agents. Currently, with the further development of the information technologies, travel cybermediaries appear in a variety of types. Certain online platforms enable consumers to make a hotel reservation directly through travel cybermediaries such as Expedia.com or Booking.com (Yacouel & Fleischer, 2011). These are meta-search websites that increasingly mediate the travel behavior process (e.g. Skyscanner, Trivago, Kayak etc.). They enable prospective travelers to look for and compare various tourism services provided by both online travel agencies and travel suppliers (Kracht & Wang, 2010). Another category of travel cybermediaries are brands offering peer-to-peer services such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing. These firms have also created active online communities. They are run by users, they have online reviews, and they leverage UGC on social media. Furthermore, there are the travel-related mediators that do not sell products but the transaction is completed on another website or offline (Minazzi, 2015). These kinds of websites allow travelers to share UGC and get informed about tourism services. Specific categories of these mediators among social media are travel review websites (TripAdvisor) and virtual communities (Lonely Planet) (Minazzi, 2015). In these Internet-based cybermediaries, online reviews, electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) and UGC in general, are fundamental elements that contribute to the expression of their brand identity. Therefore, these are ideal cases to focus on this study as it is expected that the consumer-produced content has implications in the expressions of the brand identity of these firms, namely Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK.

A firm's most valuable asset for enhancing its marketing productivity is the knowledge that has been formed about the brand in consumers' minds. Therefore, customers perceptions can influence the brand itself. As Keller (1993) claims the source of brand equity, or in other words having a well-known brand name, is customer perceptions. Customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer is familiar with the brand (brand awareness) and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory (brand image) (Keller, 1993). Therefore, studying the customer perceptions of the brand image could provide a further

understanding of the implications of UGC in brand identity expressions on social media.

Considering that, currently, users have partially gained control over brands, that the emerging travel cybermediaries leverage UGC on social media, as well as, that customer perceptions have an impact on brands, the need of further research on how is UGC part of the branding processes of travel cybermediaries is indisputable. This information will lead in the development of the main research question and its sub-questions, which will be presented in depth in the section 1.4., after the academic and societal relevance of the topic are discussed.

1.2. Academic relevance

While the existing literature has provided a solid foundation to comprehend the topic of this research, there were a few gaps that this current research endeavors to cover. In general, social media and UGC in the tourism industry have been the focal point of researchers and practitioners in the field. To begin with, Leung, Law, Hoof, and Buhalis (2013) have categorized studies on social media in the tourism industry as consumer-focused and supplier-based. Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) have drawn attention to the fact that the value of UGC as a strategic tool for tourism companies has not been researched thoroughly. Studies on the emerging travel cybermediaries have been ignored by the above literature reviews. Therefore, this study aims to explore how UGC is used by travel cybermediaries.

The supplier-based studies are mostly centered on how social media are used as tools for marketing, promotion, and research by travel enterprises (Leung et. al, 2013). Schmallegger and Carson (2008) have mentioned that new media contribute to the product distribution, the communication and the management of travel-related companies and tourism organizations. From the above, it is evident that limited research has focused on the implications of UGC in the branding process of travel enterprises, a gap that this study aims to fill. Generally, knowledge on user-generated brands (UGBs) and brand identity construction through UGC started developing a decade ago (Burmann, 2010). On this issue, Yannopoulou, Moufahim, and Xuemei (2013) have found that UGC constructs the brand identity of the so called UGBs using as an example travel cybermediaries, Airbnb and Couchsurfing. The emerging themes were that UGC contributes to the access of the brand to the private sphere, the human

dimension, the meaningful inter-personal discourses, and the authenticity (Yannopoulou et al., 2013). Exploring the indicators of the success of UGBs as well as how these brands are expected to evolve were topics recommended for future research. In this study, further understanding of the role that UGC plays in the expression of brand identities and its connection to the consumers' perceptions of brand images could fill the aforementioned gap in literature.

Last but not least, Lu and Stepchenckova (2015), analyzing studies on UGC in tourism with a focus on the methodological approaches used, found that the majority of the studies did not report the theoretical perspectives supporting the analyses. Thus, following a qualitative approach in this study will provide a new insight in comprehending more accurately how UGC is used and interpreted in the tourism industry.

1.3. Social relevance

Moreover, the thesis has also social relevance as it contributes to the understanding of how young adults, the main stakeholders of travel cybermediaries, ardent social media users and UGC creators, perceive their brand image. Currently, young adults, "are traveling more often, book more over the internet and usually spend more on travel, are avid of information and experiences as well as willing to explore more destinations" (Benckendorff, Moscardo & Pendergast, 2010, p.11). Young adults, check on average 10 sources before travel purchases and might choose instead of hotel rooms cheaper accommodations (Lee, 2013). They rely on social media and UGC when making a travel- planning decision, which could be explained by the human connection and personal storytelling (Kressmann & Skift, 2016). Additionally, young adults are the main customers of travel cybermediaries, and these brands are blooming due to them.

All preceding highlight that it is of utmost importance to follow a user-centric perspective, resulting in this study being socially relevant. First and foremost, the exploration of the users' perception could assist in comprehending the relation between the branding efforts of experts and their acceptance from their audiences. This will provide new insights for marketers in the field to understand how young adults are interpreting the brand image of the travel cybermediaries that they mostly use and, based on that, further built their brand identities using tools such as UGC. In

addition, it will inform on how users relate with brands, what are their perceptions about them, what benefits do they place on them. Overall, since travel cybermediaries are already leveraging UGC, this enhances the social relevancy of the study as it focuses on the current phenomenon of users creating and sharing brand-related content, which, consequently, leads in their participation in the co-creation of brand value.

1.4. Research Question

In view of everything previously mentioned, namely the introduction to the research problem, the scientific and the societal relevance, the purpose of this research is to explore the evolving branding logic of open source branding in the travel, leisure and hospitality sector, with a focus on UGC. The main research question is formulated as follows:

Research question: *How is UGC part of the branding process of travel cybermediaries and is this perceived by young adults?*

The transformation as well as the key elements of the new branding landscape, as well as the concept of UGC provide a solid foundation to comprehend the role that the latter plays in brand management. In order to answer the overall research question, the study focuses on two different dimensions. First and foremost, the topic will be explored from the travel cybermediaries' angle:

Sub-research question 1*: How do travel cybermediaries express their brand identities through UGC on Instagram?*

This sub-question connects the concepts of UGC and brand identity, which are going to be analyzed thoroughly in the theoretical framework. Similarly, to have a more complete insight on how UGC is part of the branding processes of travel cybermediaries the study will also explore:

Sub-research question 2*: How do young adults interpret the brand image of travel cybermediaries through UGC on Instagram?*

Answering this sub-question will provide the necessary cognizance on the young adults' perceptions of the brands that include UGC in their branding processes. To give an answer, the notion of brand image will be introduced and linked to the concept of UGC in the chapter of the theoretical framework.

1.5. Chapter overview

In order to provide an overview of the content, the complete structure of the study will be demonstrated in chronological order. In the chapter of the theoretical framework, the key concepts upon which the current research is based to answer the posed research question will be developed. To begin with, the tendencies that surfaced due to Web 2.0 and influenced branding will be presented. On top, the discourse that surrounds open source branding, different models, theories and its current features will be demonstrated, followed by the introduction to the concept of UGC. Additionally, the literature on brand identity, its various models from the literature and the corporate identity matrix will be put in the spotlight. Finally, the notion of the brand image will be examined, in order to understand what are the elements that lead towards the creation of a certain perception about a brand.

Continuing with the 'Method' chapter, the description of the methodology will be given. The reasons why a mix of qualitative methods, specifically that of content analysis and interviews, was judged as the most appropriate way to answer the research question are given. The sampling method and plan, operationalization and data collection and analysis will also be illustrated. Finally, matters of validity and reliability will be touched upon briefly. In the chapter of the results and discussion, the prominent findings from the content analysis and the interviews will be given. This chapter will include a thematic presentation of the results, with specific examples, whereas a preliminary interpretation of the core categories and subthemes and connections to literature will be attempted. In the final chapter of this study, in the conclusions, the findings of the previous section will be critically discussed. Specifically, the interconnections between the categories and sub-categories that emerged from the content analysis and the interviews will be displayed. Apart from the further interpretation of the findings and connection with the theoretical framework, the limitations of this study as well as the recommendation for future research will be indicated.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, the key concepts the current study will be based to answer the posed research questions, will be described and developed. In particular, in section 2.1, the tendencies that emerged due to Web 2.0 and influenced branding will be presented. Furthermore, in section 2.2 the discourse that surrounds open source branding, different models, theories and its current features will be explored critically while in section 2.3 the literature around user-generated content will be investigated. In addition, in sections 2.4 the notion of brand identity will be examined by presenting different models from the literature and by putting the corporate identity matrix in the spotlight. Finally, in section 2.5, literature on the brand image will be scrutinized, in order to understand what are the elements that lead towards the creation of a certain perception about a brand. The above-mentioned concepts, first, serve as a starting point for the themes expected to derive from the content analysis as a research method of the first sub-question. Besides, they provide a basis for the operationalization and the structure of the interviews as the research method of the second sub-question.

2.1. Web 2.0 and the transformation of branding

To understand how travel cybermediaries have reached to the point where they use UGC to express their brand identity, it is of the highest importance to have an insight on how Web 2.0 has contributed to the users' empowerment which subsequently has transformed the landscape of brand management. This new side of branding, known as open source branding, has been affected by three tendencies that have emerged due to the proliferation of online technologies, which are collectivism, criticism, and transparency and all place users' engagement and participation in the center (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kaul & Chaudhri, 2017).

Regarding collectivism, the term suggests participatory and collaborative behaviors with individuals generating and disseminating content (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Web 2.0 provides a fertile ground for the creation of a sense of community among like-minded users and enables their participation in micro-targeted niche groups (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, Mangold & Faulds, 2009). New forms of collective behavior and action anywhere on the spectrum among individuals, organizations, and brands are facilitated. Recently, Dolata and Schrape (2015) investigated how the differently structured social collectives on the Internet,

masses, crowds, communities, and movements, are classified and distinguished. Generally, online technologies seem to act as 'organizing agents' (Bennett & Segerberg 2012, p. 752) or in other words as 'technological tools that fundamentally enhance connectivity among people' (Bimber, Flanagin & Stohl 2012, p. 3). Social media, in particular, provide an ideal environment where people can connect with their favorite brands, participate in relevant brand communities with other brand admirers, and build peer-to-peer relationships which enable them to collaborate and share brand information (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Habibi, Laroche & Richard, 2014).

Taking into consideration the above, managers implement a number of strategies to benefit from the increasing power of the collective. First and foremost, brands following business models founded on the very principle of collective power have emerged (Pitt, Berthon, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002). For instance, the sharing economy is an economic-technological phenomenon of collaborative consumption, a peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online platforms (Hamari, Sjöklint & Ukkonen, 2016). Airbnb and Couchsurfing are based on providing peer-to-peer services to their customers, connecting hosts -wanting to provide their property- with travelers. On top of that, the power of the collective can also be used to promote brand objectives, brand decisions, and tasks (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Indicatively, online technologies allow for the aggregate compilation of consumer preferences and the obtaining of feedback from online shoppers, which could be a predictor of important performance variables such as sales and contribute to product development (Von Hippel, 2005; Kumar, Bhaskaran, Mirchandani, & Shah, 2013). At the same time, research has shown that brand loyalty can be enhanced by brand communities established on social media (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2016; Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008).

Nonetheless, a vital element of the Web-empowered social collective is that it is an independent entity whose activities are not necessarily in line with the interests of the brand. Empowered by social networking sites, blogs and wikis, consumers can share, co-create, discuss in ways that are often contradictory to the image a brand wishes to reflect (Christodoulides, 2009). Fournier and Avery (2011) have identified this new trend that has begun due to Web 2.0, as they have recognized that online technologies have given space for criticism. The new possibilities of rating, ranking, and scrutinizing have provided consumers with the tools to be much more judgmental

of companies and their brands. With Web technologies, criticizing has become easier, while, with social networks, the content of criticism travels fast and far (Pitt et al., 2002). Therefore, consumers networked together can serve as powerful allies, while at the same time critical consumers networked together can influence a brand negatively. Over and above that, criticism could take the form of anti-branding activities. Anti-branding mainly refers to rejection and anti-consumption of specific brands by consumers and online can take the form of anti-brand web sites which are online spaces that focus negative attention on a specific targeted brand (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). More recent research has shown that social media has also promoted anti-brand communities, which build around the shared aversion to a specific brand. (Popp, Germelmann, & Jung, 2016). According to Krishnamurthy and Kucuk (2009), 'consumer empowerment' and 'consumer dissatisfaction' are the primary forces that cause the anti-branding process.

Nevertheless, some companies turn customer complaints and criticism into learning opportunities that strengthen the equity of the brand (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Social media are being recognized as powerful channels enabling active listening which is significant if a company wants to understand what the social collective is expressing and use consumers' negative comments as constructive feedback (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Pina, et al., 2018). Specifically, regarding anti-branding activities, D'Arco and Marino (2018) recommended four different strategies - ignore, apologize, start a dialogue with trolls and haters, change behavior. Starting conversations and changing behavior appeared more effective in mitigating consumers' attacks. On the contrary, the first two strategies proved to be risky in some contexts (D'Arco & Marino, 2018).

Transparency signals another tendency that has emerged due to Web 2.0 (Fournier & Avery, 2011). The term implies that a brand is open to the public meaning and thus that it is also open to customers' criticism (Kaul & Chaudhri, 2017). As analyzed before, online technologies have led to more active consumer involvement which consequently has created the need for more transparency in branding (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015). By the same token, the availability of and convenient access to information means that everything could be exposed eventually. Therefore, in branding nowadays, great importance is placed on the transparency which should be engraved throughout the brand and not simply communicated (Davis, 2017). On that matter, the concept of authenticity is introduced as it is essential in

establishing transparency. Regardless, the criteria of an authentic brand are demanding and high. Fournier and Avery (2011) place the following characteristics in the authentic brand which are, namely, veridicality and genuineness in the claimed position. Likewise, messaging, assertions, and behaviors should all be supportive and aligned. In other words, the authentic brand is willingly honest and open (Fournier & Avery, 2011). However, transparency in other forms of branding might not always be considered beneficial. For instance, research on place branding argued that while the transparency of the regulatory framework can effectively improve the attractiveness of a place, the opacity of legal requirements may also attract foreign investors (Mabillard & Vuignie, 2017).

All in all, collectivism, criticism and transparency are the dominating forces that have contributed to the transformation of brand management. In this research, these notions are used as the starting point of understanding why travel cybermediaries, influenced by the new trends emerged due to Web 2.0, are curating UGC to reflect their brand identities instead of branded content.

2.2. The landscape of open source branding

In a world governed by social empowerment, criticism, and transparency, brand management has been transformed. Hafkesbrink and Schroll (2011, p. 67) refer to the transformation of branding as a 'collaborative turn', where marketers and consumers build the brands together. This implies that the brand, as Fournier and Avery explain (2011, p. 194), is a sort of open source cognitive construal "embedded in a cultural conversation in which consumers gain an equal, if not greater, say than marketers in what the brand looks like and how it behaves". To understand how UGC is part of the branding processes of travel cybermediaries, it is significant to identify the characteristics and processes of brands and brand management in the digital era. In this section, the abundance of theoretical frameworks are scrutinized and the landscape of open source branding is described critically. In the last part, the discourse that surrounds the control over brands is being addressed.

In order to explain the evolution of brands and branding, researchers have introduced various theoretical frameworks. For example, to describe new media's influence on relationships with customers, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2010) propose the "pinball" framework. Like pinball, companies throw their brands and brand-building

messages as "marketing balls" into a chaotic environment filled with empowered demanding users. In such an environment, the control of brand images and the management of customer relationships are complicated processes that are not completely in the hands of firms. Furthermore, Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) use the metaphor of improvisation (improv) theater performances, to introduce a semantic framework to shed light on the presence of brands on social media and the relationship of brands and consumers. Like improv theater, the interaction between brands and users is uncontrollable and impromptu, while brand performances are co-created. In the same framework, the metaphor indicates that the audience's level of participation in co-creation can vary during the performance, depending on the degree of improvisation and tension provided by the brand.

Moreover, to demonstrate the impact of social media on brand management, Gensler, Volckner, Liu-Thompkins, and Wiertz (2013) develop a conceptual framework in which consumers are considered the main creators of the brand stories. The consumer-created contents become determinative for the meaning of brands. However, the instability of consumer-generated brand stories due to the fact that they are more likely to change over time, might threaten the brand's aspired identity. Thus, in the digital world, brand managers need to audit and coordinate user-created content, as well as react to negative consumer-generated brand stories.

The aforementioned theoretical frameworks illustrate how the relationship between brands and users has evolved with the proliferation of social media. They are also central for this study as they highlight that, currently, users participate in the creation of brands. In the following paragraphs, the changes in brand management as a result of the increased participation of users in co-creation are presented thoroughly as it is critical to recognize how travel cybermediaries are behaving and expressing their brand identities in the new branding environment.

First and foremost, Fournier and Avery (2011) have noticed a shift in the focus from brand building to brand protection. Contrary to traditional branding, which emphasized the importance of value-creating, returns and revenue generation, the focal points of open source branding are risk management, risk assessment and risk control (Fournier & Avery, 2011). As mentioned previously, the empowered social collective might not be aligned with the interests of the brand, therefore, managers today have to consider the various risks. Apart from this, the new branding landscape demands flexibility, opportunism, and adaptation on the part of brands (Fournier &

Avery, 2011). Currently, brand strategies are characterized by serendipity, uncertainty, and reactive stance. According to Fournier and Avery (2011) quality of execution is more substantial than pre-planning for a successful campaign. Still, the accessibility and the high speed of availability of data facilitate the evaluation and optimization of campaigns with precision (Young, 2016). Another new characteristic of open source branding is that the notion of differentiation has changed from being competitor-focused. Presently, brands are differentiated by gaining culture-defined relevance while integrating naturally in Web 2.0 conversations. In this new landscape, brands are not just passively participating in cultural conversations but they should create messages that will engage their audiences and get them invited into the conversations (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

All the above, highlight the relevance of Customer Engagement as one of the critical objectives of brand managers today, as engaged individuals participate and share (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). By and large, Customer Engagement (CE) refers to the types of connections customers make with other customers, firms, and brands (Smith & Wallace, 2010). Customer Engagement Behaviors (CEBs) represent the behavioral dimension of CE. To be more precise, CEBs include, but are not limited to, a variety of customers' behavioral expressions that have an impact on brands, such as word-of-mouth (WOM) activity, referrals and recommendations, voluntary assistance with other customers, web postings and blogging, participation in brand communities, engagement in product development (van Doorn et al., 2010).

In other words, customer engagement leads to participation, which could be active as well as passive as it also includes social content consumption (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Companies encourage active involvement as it could lead to brand visibility, promotion, and credibility (Kaul & Chaudhri, 2017). On another note, exploring customer brand engagement behavior is essential as they could serve as brand missionaries, remain loyal to the same brands and provide feedback for brand management, creating a sustainable competitive advantage (Gong, 2018). Taking into account the above, CE is a key concept in this research as it provides a solid foundation of understanding the importance and the reasons why travel cybermediaries are encouraging engagement and participation by leveraging UGC as part of their branding processes.

In the leisure and hospitality literature, the benefits of customer engagement are also acknowledged (So et al., 2014). As hospitality products and services are

particularly difficult to evaluate prior to actual consumption, social networking websites and other travel- related platforms, empower customers to engage in a number of ways that go beyond transactions (Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010). Among CEBs, co-creation and WOM are the most relevant and crucial for hospitality firms (van Doorn et. al, 2010). For example, providing customer reviews is considered as one of the most common CEBs in the hospitality industry which influence potential customers' perceptions of hospitality firms and decision-making process (Chen & Xie, 2005; Zhang, Ye, Law, & Li, 2010). However, it has been expressed that generally customer behaviors beyond purchase are understudied in hospitality research (Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013). Hence, this study aims to shine a light on how the UGC, as a form of CEB, is part of the branding processes of travel cybermediaries on Instagram and on the perceptions that young adults have about their brand image without focusing on their purchase intention.

Nevertheless, in the new branding environment, the technology that was supposed to grant marketers valuable tools for their strategies has empowered consumers to act against -as mentioned before- or even ignore companies. Despite the popularity of brands in social media platforms, a few argue that the web was created to connect people and not brands with prospective customers, meaning that brands are usually 'uninvited crashers of the Web 2.0 party' (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p.193). Subsequently, brands are not always welcome in social media. Additionally, the paradox with social media marketing strategies is that, at the same time, everyone and no one, could be reached as exposure of the message depends on 'consumer volition' (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 194). For example, solutions such as browsers with 'do not track' option and ad blocker software have been taken aboard by consumers to avoid advertising (Baek & Marimoto, 2012; Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani & Smit, 2015). Marketers should keep in mind that viewers' participation, either passive or active is voluntary and as a result, they may not always be eager to create positive content or engage with the brand in general. This is confirmed by Mangold and Faulds (2009) who refer to a general loss of managers' control as the content, the timing, and frequency of the social media-based conversations are handled by consumers.

However, the general loss of manager's control is doubted by more recent literature. The creation, building and nurturing of an open-source brand community means that brands are also actively leading and guiding the conversations happening

around and about them (Verwey, 2015). Professionals join in stakeholder conversations to protect and enhance an organization or brand's reputation. Simultaneously, brands develop modes of control and use algorithms that aim to structure the participation of consumers (Carah, 2015). On that account, brands are dynamic social processes while that branding is a cultural phenomenon led by the inconsistencies and teamwork among managers, employees, consumers, and other stakeholders (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). This discourse about who has the control of brands today gives an insight into the parties that contribute to the construction of brand identities today. Users might provide the content, but brands still curate their identity. This is relevant for this research as it shows that travel cybermediaries might upload user-created images and sharing travelers' stories but they are still in control by curating the content with branded captions, deciding the time and frequency of posts.

Having stated all of the aforementioned, understanding how brands and branding have been transformed is essential in order to proceed with this research. The theoretical frameworks present the evolution of the relationship between brands and users. These frameworks are essential for this research as they highlight the fact that users are an integral part of brands today. To understand how travel cybermediaries are behaving and expressing their brand identities today, additional characteristics of the new branding landscape are presented. More specifically, CE is a key concept in this research as it explains why travel cybermediaries are leveraging UGC as part of their branding processes. Finally, yet importantly, the discourse around the control of brands shows that travel cybermediaries are still in charge of their brands even though they have integrated UGC in their branding processes.

2.3. User-generated content (UGC)

To investigate how UGC is part of the branding processes of travel cybermediaries, it is of paramount significance to explore the concepts of user-generated content (UGC) and user-generated branding (UGB). Initially, the definition of social media provided by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), places great emphasis on the content generated by users, known as UGC. This term entails a great variety of content created by internet users, such as texts, comments, digital photos or videos, and any data derived from online interactions (Obar & Wildman, 2015). To be considered as such, UGC is

publicly available either in a website or social media and it demonstrates the creativity of the user and it is generated without the intervention of professional practices (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2007). UGC has been characterized as "one of the most influential sources of online information today" (Dennhardt, 2014, p.3).

For the purpose of researching the influence of UGC on the brands of travel cybermediaries this study focuses explicitly on brand-related UGC, also referred to as consumer-generated content (CGC). Now, to understand the appearance of brand-related UGC online, it is critical to demonstrate the two contradictory tendencies that according to Arnhold (2010) have dominated brand management during the last decades. On the one hand, in an era where differentiation of brands is limited, the competition is high, and brands should be embedded naturally in users' conversations to get attention, loss of brand authenticity seems to be the case for a great number of companies. On the other hand, as mentioned in the previous sections, consumer empowerment has occurred due to the advance of online technologies (Arnhold, 2010). Both tendencies have led managers to the realization that if brands want to survive in the digital era, consumers should be encouraged to create brand-related UGC and that they should actively participate in it. So, the notion of user-generated branding (UGB) has emerged. Burmann and Arnhold (2009) define UGB as the strategic and operative handling of brand-related UGC to accomplish brand goals. To elaborate, Burmann (2010) explains UGB as the management of the voluntarily generated and publicly distributed brand messages by non-professionals.

Through UGC, members of online communities are able to influence brand activities and behaviors as research has proven that they could offer a plethora of opportunities (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011). To illustrate, the creative and innovative ideas of social users are used as advertising material by companies as they generate brand loyalty (Kaul & Chaudhri, 2017). Moreover, brand-related searches on social-networking sites are linked more than twice to UGC than to branded content (Christodoulides et al., 2012). Additionally, research has provided evidence that consumers trust more UGC than traditional advertisements and other sponsored commercial messages (Kohli et al. 2015; MacKinnon, 2012; Rodgers & Wang, 2011). Besides, the research from Christodoulides, Jevons, and Bonhomme (2012) suggests that, overall, involvement with UGC has a positive impact on consumer-based brand equity (CBBE). For instance, research in the tourism and hospitality industry has found that UGB efforts of cities and tourist destinations were more

effective than traditional advertising in relationship building with stakeholders (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013). Last but not least, brand-related UGC affects positively a brand even if the message is not aligned with the official corporate brand communication guidelines, as it has supportive power (Arnhold, 2010). Other disciplines have acknowledged additional potential benefits of UGB. Indicatively, these are cost effectiveness, the ability to track consumers, and immediate feedback regarding a brand and its products or services (Burmann, 2010). UGB could also contribute to building stronger relationships between brands and consumers and eliciting greater engagement with users on social media (Hambrick & Kang, 2015).

On the other hand, insufficient comprehension of the nature of UGC and its potential impact on brand equity can result in marketers engaging with UGC in a way that can be damaging to the brand (Christodoulides et al. 2012). As mentioned in section 2.1, UGC could also include criticism and anti-branding efforts which, consequently, could harm a brand's reputation and the way it is perceived by the public (Kaul & Chaudhri, 2017). These could extent to UGC having financial implications for the brand as well (Verwey, 2015). Moreover, consumers are also considered as an alternate source of brand dilution in the digital world (Kucuk, 2015). Through UGC, consumers might independently structure their own version of brand meanings by modifying company-generated content (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). As in the Web 2.0 era, not meeting the consumers' expectations can be punished quickly, with extensive reach and can have grave consequences, successful managers will need to carefully consider how to handle both safely and efficiently the powerful effects of UGC (Burmann, 2010; Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012; Verwey, 2015).

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate how UGC contributes to the expression of brand identities and how it is linked to the consumers' perception of brand images, using the theory of UGC both from companies and consumers perceptive could be relevant for the research. A more qualitative approach could additionally offer a new insight regarding UGC and its relevance to brand management today.

2.4. Brand identity

To investigate how UGC is part of the branding processes of travel cybermediaries, the ways in which they express their brand identities through UGC on social media is an aspect of the topic that needs further exploration. Therefore, brand identity is a key concept that should be introduced as it will provide a solid foundation in the attempt to answer the first sub-question of this study. In this section, various definitions and the elements of brand identity are going to be examined and presented thoroughly. An initial differentiation of brand identity from other releted terms will be attempted as well.

To begin with, the strategic management of brand identity has been acknowledged as a focal activity of branding. It is the core character of the brand and defines it (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). A well-defined corporate brand identity is the foundation of a company and generally, it is a long-term construct (Aaker, 2004; Balmer 2008; Balmer, Stuart, & Greyser, 2009; Burmann, Jost-Benz, & Riley, 2009; Urde, 2003). Brand identity is formulated internally, typically before presenting the brand to external audiences, and is managed by the brand management team (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). Moreover, it is defined as the set of unique brand associations that producers aspire to create or maintain, and the symbols they use to identify the brand to people (Aaker, 1996a).

Aaker (1996a) and Kapferer (2008) have presented definitions of brand identity that emphasize the need for stability over time. To elaborate, it was considered that brands should have a clear and consistent identity, so that consumers have a stable reference when recalling the brand (Aaker, 1996a; Kapferer, 2008). The notion of the enduring brand identity, that was introduced, has two different dimensions. On the one part, the word 'enduring' entails that brand identity is static, fixed and unaffected by the environmental changes. On the opposing part, an enduring brand identity means that it is dynamic, where the core values remain stable over time, but continuous adjustments are taking place depending on the context.

Nonetheless, as analyzed before, in the new branding landscape, brands are co-created with users, therefore, they often curate UGC to promote their aspired brand identity. In more recent research, the rising role of consumers as co-contributors to brand identity expression and development is considered. More specifically, Silveira, Lages, and Simoes (2013) have established a new conceptualization of brand identity.

Currently, brand identity is acknowledged as dynamic and constructed step-by-step through time mutually from managers and other stakeholders. Managers, employees, consumers and other stakeholders increasingly co-create brands, using images and language that formulate brand meanings and values, which, subsequently, shape brand identity (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Understanding the dynamic aspect of brand identities is key in this research, as the study focuses on investigating how brands are expressing their brand identities based on the inputs of their users.

Within the above-mentioned open source branding context where brand identity is constantly challenged as brand narratives are continuously rewritten by multiple authors, little agreement exists on the dimensions of brand identity (Urde, 2013; Verwey, 2015). Keller (1993) considers a name, a term, a sign, a symbol, a design, or a combination of them as the individual components that are part of a brand identity. All in all, everything that is intended to identify the goods and services of a company and to differentiate them from those of competitors is an element of brand identity (Keller, 1993). What is more, the corporate brand identity matrix provides academics and managers with a unified and more definitive model to describe, define and align brand identity (Urde, 2013). The internal component of brand identity is described by three characteristics of a firm: its "mission and vision", its "culture" and its "competences", which are elements that are mainly defined by the company itself. The external component consists of "value proposition", "relationships" and "position", and it is related to the influence of external factors on the company. The matrix is completed by three elements that are both internal and external. "Personality" describes the corporate brand's individual character, whereas "expression" defines the verbal and visual displays of the brand. The "brand core", including a brand promise and its core values, is critical in the corporate brand identity (Urde, 2013).

To have a complete understanding of brand identity, it is of utmost importance to differentiate the term from other related ones. In research, the terms "brand identity" and "brand reputation" often overlap, and though no consensus exists on the definition, in general, branding researchers agree that they differ (de Chernatony, 1999; Walker, 2010). The dilution in the discourse around what brand identity really is, whether it is a vision shaped internally by the brand managers, as depicted in current definitions, the external perceptions of the consumers, or a combination of both perspectives, has resulted in using the notions of brand identity, brand image,

and brand positioning interchangeably in the literature and in practice (Silveira et al. 2013). In the following section, the difference between brand identity and brand image will be examined in-depth.

All the above, the definitions, the components of brand identity as well as its differentiation from related terms were the stepping stone in the attempt to explore how travel cybermediaries are expressing their brand identities on social media. In the beginning, the definitions have highlighted that brand identity is something constructed internally but also influenced by external factors, consistent but at the same time dynamic. This clarification is essential to proceed as, within this study, light is shed on how travel cybermediaries are using the content made by users to communicate their brand identity with their audiences. Furthermore, the corporate identity matrix provides an initial conception of what components of brand identity are expected to be promoted by the travel cybermediaries.

2.5. Brand image

In order to give an answer to the main research question, the second dimension of this topic is focused on exploring young adults' perception of the brand images of travel cybermediaries. Thus, introducing the concept of brand image is fundamental. First, the definition will be given, followed by an analysis of the different associations that consumers are making to create a specific brand image. Then, the connection of brand images with the theory of self-concept will be examined. Finally, yet importantly, the term of brand image and brand identity will be distinguished.

Brand image has gained great attention from academics and practitioners as it plays an integral role in marketing and branding activities. Regardless whether the brand represents a product or service, brand image is considered as the reflection of consumers' perceptions, hence it should be considered as a reality for the company (Kapferer, 2002). These perceptions, or in other words the brand image that consumers shape, is also the brand value that consumers attach in a brand (Yuan, Liu, Luo, & Yen, 2016). Addedly, brand image is the main driver of brand equity, which relates to consumer's general perception and feeling about a brand and has an influence on consumer behavior (Keller, 1993). To further explain, a positive brand image influences consumer purchasing behavior and urges them to pay higher prices, which in turn provides competitive advantages and maximizes the market share and

success of the company (Aranda, Gómez, & Molina, 2015; Zhang, 2015). Besides, Bruhn, Schoenmueller, and Schäfer (2012) underline that the concept of brand image has two dimensions. Namely, there are functional and hedonic brand images. Functional brand images are linked with the performance and the practical aspects of the brands, whereas hedonic brand images are connected with the emotion or sentiment that brands generate to consumers. For the sake of this research, it is critical to distinguish these two parts of brand image, as emphasis will be given in both while exploring young adults' perceptions of brand images of travel cybermediaries.

Keller conceived the concept "customer-based brand equity (CBBE)" in 1993, which refers to the effects of the reactions of consumers towards branding campaigns, taking into consideration that the consumers might have varying levels of knowledge and information about the brand. As mentioned previously, brand image and brand awareness are the bedrock of brand equity. Brand image is defined as perceptions about a brand reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory (Keller, 1993). Brand associations are informational nodes that contain the meaning of the brand for consumers and they can be classified into three major categories with respect to their level of abstraction: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Attributes are those descriptive features that characterize a product or service. Specifically, they are what consumers think the product or service is or has and what is related with its purchase or consumption. Benefit is the personal value consumers attach to the product or service attributes or, in other words, what consumers think the product or service can do for them. Benefits could be symbolic, experiential and functional. Brand attitudes are defined as consumers' overall evaluations of a brand (Keller, 1993). Ideally, in consumers' memory, brand image perception should encompass all three types of brand associations (Hsieh, Pan, & Setiono, 2004). The favorability, strength, and uniqueness of brand associations also affect the consumers' perceptions of the brand images and influence brand equity (Keller, 1993). The three categories, attributes, benefits, and attitudes, are the starting point of understanding the kind of brand associations that young adults are holding in memory for travel cybermediaries.

For marketers, nevermind their companies' marketing strategies are, the main purpose of their activities is to influence consumers' perception and attitude toward a brand, or in other words, to establish the brand image in consumers' mind (Zhang, 2015). However, despite the efforts of brands to create certain brand associations,

these are often connected with consumers' self-concept. The self-concept encompasses perceptions that one holds about themselves with elements such as capabilities, characteristics, appearance, and personality. When the brand image is in line with the consumers' self-concept, consumers tend to think better of the company (Graeff, 1997). Consequently, if marketers want their brand images to be perceived positively, they should research the consistency between the brand image and consumers' self-concept, as they might express various ones depending on the context (Zhang, 2015).

Brand identity and brand image consist of of several subcomponents, with brand identity containing brand awareness, purpose, differentiation, and offerings and brand image connecting to brand credibility, brand character, consumers' overall attitude towards the brand, and consumers' feelings for the brand (de Chernatony 1999). In other words, brand identity reflects the companies' aspirations of how they want to be perceived, whereas brand image relates to how they are actually perceived. Consumers interpret the firm's identity and translate it into an image, and the image, in turn, affects consumer preferences (Sääksjärvi & Samiee, 2011). The aforementioned provide the necessary theoretical background to differentiate between the two terms, brand identity and brand image, as well as to understand how they are interrelated.

Having stated all of the above, defining the concept of brand image plays major role in order to examine how young adults are perceiving the brand images of travel cybermediaries. At first, the notion of brand image was defined and its relevance in branding today was highlighted. The current study also follows Keller's (1993) definition of brand image and adopts attributes, benefits, and attitudes as an initial inspiration that assists in identifying the different kinds of brand associations that young adults are holding for travel cybermediaries. Furthermore, the connection of brand images with the theory of self-concept was examined, in order to underline that having certain perceptions about a brand is affected by consumers' own perceptions about themselves as well. Last, but still notable, the terms brand image and brand identity were distinguished so as to understand the two different aspects of the research question. Hence, the first sub-question focuses on how travel cybermediaries aim to be perceived by expressing their brand identities through UGC whereas the second sub-questions dives into exploring how young adults are perceiving the brand images of travel cybermediaries.

3. METHOD

As the focal point of this research is to explore how travel cybermediaries express their brand identities through UGC and how young adults interpret these brand images, a qualitative approach is required. In this chapter, the reasons why a mix of qualitative methods, specifically those of content analysis and interviews, was judged as the most appropriate way to answer the research question, are given. The sampling method and plan, operationalization and data collection and analysis will also be illustrated. Finally, validity and reliability are two integral concepts for any research and, accordingly, they must be discussed. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that validity and reliability are not prominent in qualitative research, thus, any reference to them will be brief.

3.1. Research design

To explore the different dimensions of how UGC is used in branding by travel cybermediaries and how, as a result, their brand image is interpreted by consumers, mixed qualitative methods were implemented. The combination of methodology in the study of a phenomenon is the definition that Denzin (1978) gave to triangulation. The "within-method" type of triangulation could enrich the understanding of the phenomenon by capturing a more complete, holistic and contextual portrayal of the units under study. Mixed qualitative methods could suggest conclusions to which a single method would miss (Jick, 1979).

To answer the first sub-question, qualitative content analysis was selected due to its flexible yet thoroughly investigative nature (Schreier, 2013). Schreier (2013) outlines that qualitative content analysis has three distinct characteristics. First of all, it reduces data, meaning that the researcher has to focus on specific aspects of the material, those that are connected with the research question. The meaning behind every piece of data is taken to higher level of abstraction, which subsequently leads to categories that apply to multiple parts of the material. In addition, qualitative content analysis is systematic, as every single part of the material is being examined in a way that it is relevant to the research question. Likewise, specific steps, which differentiate depending on the method of analysis are applied. Last, but not least, qualitative content analysis is flexible, in the sense that the findings, even if they are concept-driven, should always match with the material (Schreier, 2013). The foregoing

features of qualitative content analysis provide evidence that this method is ideal in this research for extracting the necessary data. As the social media posts reflect on the brand identity expressions of travel cybermediaries, it was useful to study how terminology, type of language, symbols, connotations and other key phrases differentiate. By creating themes and sub categories from these themes, this study broke down how travel cybermediaries use UGC to develop every single component of their brand identity while similarities to the corporate brand identity matrix were pointed out (Urde, 2013).

To study young adults' perceptions of the brand images, in-depth interviews were carried out. Particularly, individual face-to-face interviews provided a more detailed investigation of the subjects. Nonetheless, as practical issues such as schedule conflicts or distant place of residence occurred, four interviews were conducted via Skype. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, meaning that there was an initial plan but the order of the questions changed and new ones were added, depending on the flow of the conversation (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Before the interview, the consent of the interviewee was acquired, by presenting them the research and informing them about the process, the objectives and the duration of the interviews (Kvale, 2007). Specifically, before the beginning of the interviews a consent form was given and signed by the participants disclosing all the necessary information. Still, not many details were revealed for the sake of the research and to prevent any bias. Furthermore, the interviewees were aware that their participation is voluntary, that they could quit the procedure at any point and that the gathered data are to be used for research purposes, as well as that they have the right to anonymity and confidentiality. Lastly, as the interview was recorded, it was essential to inform the interviewees about this part as well and, also, ask for their permission.

3.2. Sampling

As it is specified in the sub-questions, the objects of this study are travel cybermediaries and young adults. To research how travel cybermediaries reflect their brand identities through UGC, cases of different types of travel cybermediaries were selected: Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK. To investigate consumers' perception of the brand image, young adults (25-34) were selected as the target population.

3.2.1. Content analysis of Instagram posts

Airbnb is a popular online marketplace for short-term rentals. What distinguishes the brand from other travel cybermediaries is that it offers peer-to-peer services meaning that a guest seeking to rent a room or property on the platform will contact another user. Airbnb was selected as a case for this study as it invites guests to submit their travel experiences by tagging @Airbnb on Instagram. Couchsurfing is, also, a website facilitating hospitality exchange between global travelers and local hosts. Now Couchsurfing has been established in the market as a platform that offers a stylish way of travel, which creates new forms of tourist experiences (Chen, 2017). The reason why Couchsurfing is among the cases in this study, is that the brand leverages UGC on Instagram. To be more precise, by using the hashtag #shareyourlife, users have the opportunity to see their posts uploaded in the official Instagram account of Couchsurfing. KAYAK is a meta-search engine that offers a wide selection of hotels, flights and car rentals to its users. In comparison to the previous two cybermediaries, KAYAK connects suppliers with consumers. It was selected as one of the cases to be studied, as it encourages its Instagram followers to share their tips, trips and photos using the hashtag #KAYAKPicks.

In this study, in line with following the methodological guidelines for this thesis, approximately 50 user-generated posts uploaded to the official Instagram account of each case, or, in other words, a total of 150 Instagram posts, were analyzed. The decision to collect the minimum number of Instagram posts was determined by the fact that this study follows a mix of qualitative methods meaning that two sets of empirical data were analyzed in total. The 150 Instagram posts were the most recent 50 posts that each brand has shared and gave credits to their original creators in order to have up-to-date results starting from the posts that were uploaded around the beginning of March. Both user-generated images and their brand-generated captions were interpreted to investigate how these travel cybermediaries curate UGC to express their brand identity. Moreover, it was clear that hashtags represent to some degree the intended meaning of the post, therefore, for this research the ones that were part of the caption have also been included in the analysis. Instagram was selected as the platform to collect social media content since it is the medium that brands use to leverage and curate UGC.

3.2.2. In-depth interviews

The target population of the second sub-question were young adults aged from 25 -34. The decision behind this choice lied on various statistical data. First and foremost, young adults, aged 25 and above, are the biggest content creators contributing over 70% of all UGC (Wright, 2017). According to the same article, 40% of young adults also claim that they use UGC for their travel planning decisions.

In Statista, a survey indicated that, in 2017, the highest percentage (36%) of Airbnb users were 25 to 34 years old ('Share of Airbnb users by age group in the United States and Europe 2017', n.d.).

In order for participants to be eligible for this research, they additionally had to follow and even engage in any way (likes, comments, etc.) with at least one or more of the three Instagram accounts of the cases that are studied. The choice is focused on people more publicly engaged with the brand as the research gives emphasis on UGC. Since the sampling units were selected according to particular criteria (age and certain Instagram activity), non-probability sampling was implemented (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). It was also a case of purposive or judgmental sampling, and more specifically homogeneous purposive sampling, where the selection of the participants is based on usefulness for the research (Babbie, 2017; Patton, 2002).

The first step was to locate the potential interviewees through the Instagram accounts of Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK. By looking whether they follow these accounts, the followers that fit the defined criteria were identified and contacted via direct messages, to explain the goal of this research and to ask if they are willing to help. Following the methodological guidelines, ten interviews were conducted. After the 8th interview, saturation was reached and repeating themes were emerging. The duration of the interviews was between 40 and 55 minutes.

3.2.3 Interviewees' background information

As it was previously mentioned, the target group of this research are young adults between 25 and 34 years old who have used and follow at least one of the brands, Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK. The average age of the interviewees is 26.5 years old. All participants asked anonymity. Therefore, pseudonyms were assigned to each of them in order to conceal their real names and other personal information. The given

names of the interviewees, together with a respective number are exhibited in the following table, for the convenience of the reader. The age, nationality and other demographic information are elements that are mentioned as well in the following table as they provide evidence that people of different backgrounds were considered for this study, to avoid any biased results. More information about the companies that they follow and use can also be found below.

Table 1. Interviewees' information

Participant No.	Pseudonym of interviewees	Age	Country	Brand usage	Brand follower
1.	Maria	25	Greece	Airbnb	Airbnb
2.	Laura	25	Slovenia	Airbnb Couchsurfing	Airbnb Couchsurfing
3.	Nick	25	Greece	Airbnb Couchsurfing	Airbnb Couchsurfing
4.	Wei	27	China	Airbnb Couchsurfing	Airbnb Couchsurfing
5.	Anna	26	Bulgaria	Airbnb	Airbnb KAYAK
6.	Philip	29	Greece	Airbnb Couchsurfing	Airbnb Couchsurfing
7.	Jan	27	Poland	Airbnb, Couchsurfing KAYAK	Airbnb Couchsurfing KAYAK
8.	Anastasia	25	Greece	Airbnb KAYAK	Airbnb KAYAK
9.	Julia	27	Netherlands Austria	Airbnb KAYAK	Airbnb KAYAK
10.	Kevin	28	The Netherlands	Airbnb KAYAK	Airbnb KAYAK

It is also noteworthy that this background information serves only as a preparatory part for the Results section, and it is included here in order to assist the reader to better understand the findings. Thus, this sub-section is not to be viewed as the focus of the current research.

3.3. Operationalization

To define themes for the content analysis, the trial coding phase of the pilot interviewee allowed for the coding frame to determine what the dominant themes and subcategories will be and whether they are sufficient in providing an answer for the research question. However, in qualitative content analysis, the structure of the coding frame can take lead from both data and concept driven methods (Schreier, 2013). In this study, the initial coding frame was mainly based on the data, but in the second step of its analysis the scheme integrated the theory of brand identity and, to be more precise, the corporate brand identity matrix. With the initial content analysis, it was signaled that travel cybermediaries are using UGC to promote their *mission and vision*, *culture*, *competences*, *value proposition, relationships, position, personality, expression,* and *brand core.*

To come up with topics and questions for the interviews which would help answer the second sub-research question, the key concepts that compose it were considered in the theoretical framework. Specifically, the theory of brand image, and more specifically the different kinds of brand associations that the interviewees have in their memory, as well as questions about the favorability, the strength and the authenticity of these brand associations were included in the final interview guide. Indicatively, the main categories of questions were: *Travel behavior, Travel cybermediaries, Instagram activity.* All three categories included questions based on Keller's attributes, benefits, and attitudes that young adults hold for travel cybermediaries. Additionally, few questions included in the topic *Instagram activity* derived from the concept of UGC. Specifically, these were divided into subsequent elements, to create an interview guide with topics and questions (Appendix A). Generally, following the guidelines of Hermanowicz (2002) for a great interview, the final plan included ten general questions, which, including the probes, resulted in 25 to 30 questions, to fulfill the 45- to 60-minute duration. Probes elicit meaningful and

detailed information from the participants and guerantee that there will be enough resources to fill up the time (Hermanowicz, 2002).

In the theoretical framework, the main concepts of this study were introduced. The research question, and the sub-questions that emerged, are connected with notions such as open source branding, UGC, brand identity and brand image. Open source branding provided a solid foundation to understand how brand management has transformed with the emergence of social media and UGC. Since the purpose of this study is to investigate how UGC contributes to the expression of brand identities and how it is connected to the consumers' perception of brand images, the theory of UGC was used in the operationalization of both content analysis and interviews.

3.4. Data collection

The collection of the data for the content analysis was done manually and was completed within a week. As mentioned previously, the 150 most recent user-generated posts from Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK were collected. To guarantee that the content uploaded to the official Instagram accounts of the selected brands was user-generated, I first examined if the brands have given credits to the original creators of the photos by tagging them. In many cases, I tracked the original creators in order to ensure that they are real users and not other brands promoted by Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK. Branded posts such as professional videos and images that were occasionally uploaded were not considered for this study as the focus is on how travel cybermediaries are expressing their brand identities through UGC. Then, the photos and the brand-generated captions were screenshot and inserted in Atlas T.I qualitative tool of analysis. It is noteworthy that the comments under these posts were not considered in this research.

As it was noted earlier ten interviews were conducted in total, namely six face-to-face and four via Skype, usually at a time and place that served the participant. All ten interviews were conducted in English, as all interviewees were fluent in the language, and were collected in a timespan of approximately three weeks. The duration of the interviews was from 40 to 55 minutes. The data were collected with the help of a recording device, as all interviewees have provided their consent. In all cases, but especially in the interviews conducted via Skype, the audio quality was tested by recording a sample to ensure that there will not be any issues. In one

interview via Skype, connection was lost in a few parts but the interviewee was asked to repeat her answers. The next step was to transcribe it verbatim. A certain degree of reliability was achieved by transcribing the interviews together with the pauses and other verbal indications, as they could be critical for the analysis (Silverman, 2011). Nevertheless, as transcriptions by hand are time-consuming, I implemented various special software available online that automatically processed vocal data, such Happy Scribe, Descript and Temi. However, constant checks were necessary, and a final check was done before the submission of the final thesis. The transcriptions helped to familiarize with the collected data, a primary step in thematic analysis, which will be discussed in the following chapter. Like the Instagram posts, the transcribed interviews were inserted in Atlas T.I as a separate project, in order to avoid any possible confusion between the datasets.

3.5. Data analysis

For the analysis of the datasets, thematic analysis was applied in order to determine specific themes and patterns that emerge from the theoretical framework. As Braun and Clarke (2006) indicate, "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). Its assets are that it is fast, accessible and flexible. By following this method of analysis, the linkages among the data, their similarities and differences, as well as the ways in which these interrelate with particular components and characteristics of the overall information, were described (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

Following the six steps for thematic analysis, that Braun and Clarke (2006) introduced the analysis started with the "familiarization with data, creation of preliminary codes, search for potential themes, review of themes, definition and denomination of identified themes and formulation of the final analysis" (p. 87). The process of coding, namely creating data categories with commonalities (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 131), is integral in this method of analysis. The coding process was based on the three particular levels of coding of grounded theory, as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), due to its systematic and organized way of analyzing the data. Boeije (2010) also describes the same three steps, which are adapted to thematic analysis.

To begin with the notes taken during the interviews, their transcriptions and multiple re-reads provided the starting point to familiarize with the material and determine preliminary themes and codes. As described earlier, the initial themes and codes stemmed from the preliminary examination of the literature. Then, open coding was implemented, which was the first step towards organizing the relevant data (Boeije, 2010). Open coding required some analytical decisions to be made about the data itself, while small explanatory definitions were inserted to facilitate the following steps (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Even though, theory was considered, at this stage, the codes that derived were also data driven, and were assigned to describe pieces of the material. Essentially, these codes were revised, in order to minimize their number by manually comparing and describing them. This led to the creation of axial codes which determine the sub-categories of the main theme and emerged after grouping the open codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through selective coding, the conclusive categories from the axial codes, which represented the key concepts of the study, formed the core categories, in other words the most prominent and encountered category, central to the data (Boeije, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The final core themes were linked to the theoretical framework of the research and examples for each case were given to explain the results. These core categories provide an answer to the posed research question and the respective sub-questions.

Regarding reliability, it is expected that the results of this qualitative study may not be replicable in more or less identical ways. What is important is that this study is clear on the factors that influenced the particular findings. My reflexivity as a researcher is also going to be examined, in the limitations that are going to be addressed in the 'Conclusions'. Furthermore, concerning validity, a qualitative research is "valid" when it is rigorous, consistent, trustworthy, credible, and transferable and that it examines what the research question focused on. Matters of reliability and validity, will be addressed thoroughly in the 'Results' section.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current study aims to investigate how UGC is part of the branding processes of travel cybermediaries. In order to provide an answer to the research question, this study's focal point is to explore the ways in which travel cybermediaries express their brand identities through UGC followed by the perceptions of their brand images by young adults. In this chapter, through sections 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 the recurring themes and sub-themes are thoroughly discussed, together with their linkages to the theoretical framework and specific examples.

Specifically, by examining the Instagram posts, two overarching themes became apparent, which are presented in section 4.1 and 4.2. Travel cybermediaries are mainly presenting their engaged orientation as well as their dynamic expressions and features to express their brand identities. To further explore the impact of UGC in branding, it was critical to investigate the young adults' perceptions of brand images and how these were connected with the expressions of brand identities. After analyzing interviews, two core categories emerged which are elaborated in sections 4.3 and 4.4. Young adults perceive that travel cybermediaries have functional and experiential benefits and that they generate feelings of intimate connection with their brand identities. Finally, the two coding trees with all the selective, the axial codes, and some open code examples that derived are available at Appendices B and C.

4.1. Brand's engaged orientation

By scrutinizing the Instagram posts of Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK, the brands' engaged orientation appeared as a theme. This category indicates the orientation these brands have and communicate online which is a component of the brand identity travel cybermediaries are expressing on Instagram through UGC. Specifically, the majority of the data show that the travel cybermediaries are trying to create favorable brand associations that will connect their brand name with the idyllic aspect of travelling, the strong human connections and the local integration. These findings could also be considered as an indicator of the underlying philosophy of the brands. However, a simple examination of content can only provide an impression of the orientation brands are expressing on Instagram.

Even though engaged orientation has not been mentioned in theory as an element of brand identity, the concept is related to the core values of the brands and shows what travel cybermediaries are standing for (Urde, 2013). Additionally, the orientation of these brands is linked with the notion of culture of an organisation, which is a broad reflection of its corporate attitudes, values and beliefs (Urde, 2013). The aforementioned findings provide an answer to the first sub-question on how travel cybermediaries, namely Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK, are expressing their brand identities through UGC on Instagram.

4.1.1. Idyllic aspect of travelling

A considerable amount of the data proved that the brands are reposting idealized user-generated images revealing that their engaged orientation is focused on inspiring people to travel more. This finding shows that the orientation of travel cybermediaries to present the idyllic aspect of travelling is one of the ways that these brands communicate their brand identity online, and especially on Instagram. Generally, Instagram is a platform which, through options such as filters, beautifies pictures and displays the various aspects of life in an ideal way (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). These brands are showcasing travelling in a heavenly way, as they want their brand name and the consumption of their services to be associated with the idyllic aspect of travelling. It is noteworthy that none of the data includes unpleasant displays or user created images curated negatively by the brands.

To elaborate, all three brands are reposting a plethora of images in bright colors and in sunny locations. Even when they are posting a gloomy place, the scenery seems picturesque. Figure 1 provides an excellent example of idealized sunny and gloomy places posted by Couchsurfing. Furthermore, breathtaking views, from tall mountains or luxurious city apartments, highlight the effort to convey that travelling, preferably with their brands' services, offers the chance to view incredible sceneries.

Figure 1: A sunny and a gloomy picturesque location by Couchsurfing

Brands also give a lot of emphasis in presenting nature as well. Airbnb often depicts properties in secluded areas, the countryside, forests or close to exotic beaches, while it also displays pets and other domesticated animals. Similarly. in the caption the brand indicates when the property is close to wildlife, and the outdoor activities that travelers could experience in natural surroundings. Airbnb also points out the fact that a house might be environmentally friendly. Couchsurfing mainly focuses on presenting natural sites and giving background information and graphic descriptions of the area. The brand also shows Couchsurfer who have slept outdoors to illustrate the closeness to the nature users enjoy when travelling with their services. Brands also appear to create the idea that experiences gained by their services are causing positive contented sentiment to the travelers. That is the reason why in most of the cases when humans are shown in the pictures, they are always smiling with Couchsurfing being the brand that mainly follows this practice.

Another factor that creates an idyllic opinion for travelling is the fact that the brands in their captions are often trying to sparkle the users' travel-related imagination by describing vividly what they could do if they were in the destination or the accommodation shown in the post at the moment. Airbnb mainly uses this practice by narrating possible scenarios that users could experience if they pick one of their properties as their accommodation during a trip. For instance, they describe how

they could unwind in the porch of their Airbnb, as demonstrated on Figure 2, how they could enjoy the sunset after a long day at the beach located a few steps from the house and many more. Couchsurfing focuses on describing the destinations and the neighborhoods shown in the images as if it is narrating a fairytale, while KAYAK is even more direct. In Figure 2, the brand is encouraging users to picture themselves hiking in the mountains shown in the user-generated image.

Figure 2: Airbnb and KAYAK creating mental travel-related image

By and large, all brands by posting idealized travel-related UGC of destinations, accommodation, and unique experiences are providing travelling inspiration. Still, KAYAK and Couchsurfing are motivating their users to travel in even more direct ways. Through its Instagram account, KAYAK promotes the inclusion of traveling in users' lifestyle under every circumstance. For example, in a post, KAYAK is urging its audience to travel, by simply writing in the caption to "just go […] on that trip". Couchsurfing, on the other hand, in a block of 25 to 30 hashtags which is embedded under every caption, includes multiple inspirational travel-related hashtags. These hashtags, such as #wanderlust, #lovetraveling, #seetheworld, #travelmore, #travelbug, etc prove that the brand tries to categories its posts in a way that it will be easy to be tracked down by users that want to be inspired to travel.

All in all, the above-mentioned findings demonstrate that the orientation of travel cybermediaries to promote the idyllic aspect of travelling is a component of the

brand identity they express on Instagram through UGC. In other words, by exhibiting idealized user-created content of sunny or gloomy places, breathtaking views, nature, by creating mental travel-related images through branded captions and by directly encouraging users to travel, Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK show their engaged orientation, and subsequently, a part of their brand identity.

4.1.2. Strong human connection

After examining the Instagram posts, another central aspect of brands' engaged orientation is the strong human dimension. In particular, the human factor is integral both in the services as well as in the way travel cybermediaries are communicating on Instagram. In an environment where the digital technology mediates between businesses and customers, it is the emotional, human dimension that delivers success (Belleghem, 2015). The data of this sub-category indicates that, one of the core dimensions of the brand identities of travel cybermediaries, expressed on Instagram, revolves around their inclination to display strong human connections.

Data show that Couchsurfing is the brand which places the most emphasis in the promotion of the human connection, due to the nature of its services. Previous research has proved that Couchsurfing has created an online-offline community changing the terms in which people negotiate social trust and belonging (Rosen, Lafontaine, & Hendrickson, 2011). The brand based its growth on human trust, communication, respect and open-mindedness. In order for users to accept staying with a stranger for free accommodation, the brand had to present this human connection as its asset. Moreover, Yannopoulou, Moufahim, and Bian (2013) have argued that the idea of human relationships is the basis of the brand identity of Couchsurfing.

More specifically, the majority of the Instagram posts of Couchsurfing displays pictures of big groups of people and shares the stories of how they have met and became friends. Also, making new friends is introduced as the benefit of using Couchsurfing. Besides, the brand often shows people that have gained lasting international friendships through travelling with a strong bond that motivates them to meet every few years. In Figure 3, for example, Couchsurfing shared two user-generated images, one that shows friends from three different parts of the world that have chosen to meet and travel to a fourth after two years, and another of two

travelers reuniting in Cairo. An efficient way to connect with other humans is through food and Couchsurfing knows that as it often depicts guests and hosts making food exchanges. To repay the visit, guests cook traditional dishes from their country whereas hosts do the same to welcome them in their home. On top of the that, the brand has created a relevant hashtag, #couchsurfingfriendship, for the users that want to explore the friendships that have been created with the "intervention" of Couchsurfing. The hashtags is also evident in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Couchsurfers' international and lasting friendships

What is more, the findings demonstrate that Airbnb mainly highlights the impact of the host in the whole travelling experience. To give an example, the brand often narrates the hosts' background story and even describes how much effort they have put to create a unique accommodation option for their visitors. In addition, they often remind that the hosts could be helpful to the visitors by providing tips and recommending certain cafes, restaurants, sights etc (Figure 4). As stated in the section of the theoretical framework, Airbnb is a representative example of sharing economy. Considering this, the prior findings are confirmed by Airbnb CPO Joe Gebbia who defines sharing economy as a 'commerce with the promise of human connection' (Gebbia 2016).

KAYAK presents the human element from another angle. The company presents travelling as an ideal opportunity to meetup with long distance friends and

relationships and, generally, bond with already existing connections. This aspect of human connection is also shown in Figure 4, in comparison to the human factor in Airbnb's Instagram account.

Figure 4: Airbnb's host sharing tips and KAYAK enabling meetups with long distance friends

Another critical finding is the fact that all companies are trying to create a sense of community online. All companies are encouraging users to share their stories and images by tagging the brands or using a specific hashtag, which for Airbnb is @Airbnb, for Couchsurfing is #shareyourlife, and for KAYAK is #KAYAKPicks. Nonetheless, Couchsurfing tries to create a sense of community also offline by referring to brand events and meetups that all Couchsurfers are welcome to. One of these events is the 2019 Austin Couch Crash which is described in the relevant caption as an experience in a new location with a bigger group of community members instead of a single host. Another event that the brand posted about was the Washington DC Couchsurfing crew karaoke meetup. According to previous research, increased attendance to Couchsurfing gatherings is positively related to a sense of belonging to the community (Rosen, Lafontaine, & Hendrickson, 2011).

The above explain that the engaged orientation of travel cybermediaries to present strong human ties is one of the ways that these brands are expressing their

brand identity on Instagram through UGC. Creating strong bonds with new people worldwide, connecting with local hosts and long-distance relations, as well as being part of a community are the aspects of human connection that travel cybermediaries are demonstrating to show their orientation and, therefore, their brand identity.

4.1.3. Local integration

A considerable amount of the data show that local integration is another aspect of the engaged orientation travel cybermediaries are presenting online. This result indicates that the orientation to present the travelers' local integration is one of the components of the brand identity that these brands communicate through UGC on Instagram. In the analyzed posts, it seems that taking part in the brand experience provides a privileged access to a city and its people, which is aligned with the findings of Yannopoulou, Moufahim, and Bian (2013). It is worth mentioning that the engaged orientation to local integration is prominent in the posts of Airbnb and Couchsurfing, which could be explained by the fact that these two brands are offering alternative ways of accommodation while KAYAK acts as mediator between traditional suppliers such as hotels and hostels, and travelers.

Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK manifest that travelers have the opportunity to explore the local art and design, the local cuisine, culture, events, and tradition through their services. Concerning local art, design and culture, Airbnb points out the local elements in the interior design of its properties, Couchsurfing refers to local art history, and KAYAK, in a post, shows local sculptures. Regarding local cuisine, captions by Airbnb include recommendations of local dishes in local spots as a complementary way to experience the local vibe, as demonstrated in Figure 5. Couchsurfing describes the traditional dishes that hosts and guests cook for each other as a form of submerging in the local culture and of exchanging culinary knowledge. A limited part of the posts shows KAYAK referring to the local cuisine and treats of the destinations. Research has shown travelers value the locality in local food which has an impact on travel satisfaction (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016). In limited parts of the data, brands inform about local events and festivities as a way for travelers to immerse in the local culture. For example, Airbnb and KAYAK refer to annual local festivals, while, in a post, Couchsurfing presents the Golden Week celebrated in Japan.

Figure 5: Airbnb and KAYAK referring to the local cuisine of the destination

Furthermore, data reveal that hosts are playing a significant role in experiencing the local way of life. In the posts by Couchsurfing, hosts are being shown opening their private homes, providing a free space to stay, taking the Couchsurfer around, and introducing their 'new friend' to the city, its culture, and people from the advantageous point of a local resident. Yannopoulou, Moufahim, and Bian (2013) characterize this as the ultimate authentic experience. Couchsurfing also gives the chance to its users to experience cultural diversity and overcome the language barrier with the help of their hosts. The hosts' impact on travelers' local integration is explained by the example in Figure 6. Besides, Airbnb demonstrates that its hosts are also boosting the travelling experience by providing local tips and recommendations.
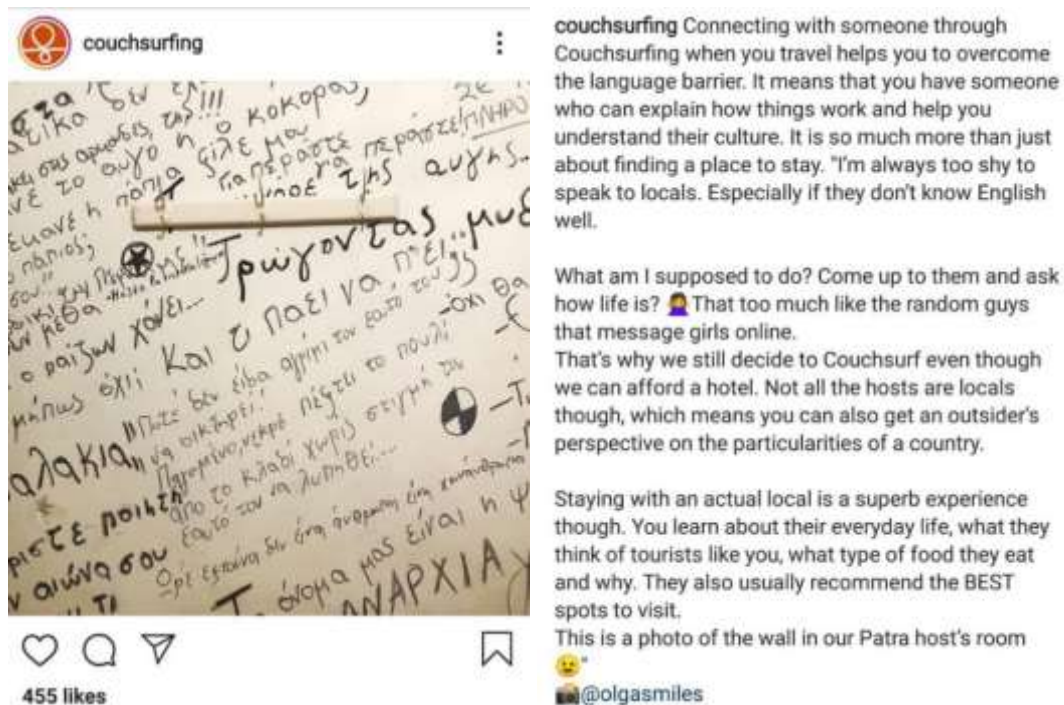
Figure 6: Staying with a local Couchsurfing host

By introducing the local factor, Airbnb and Couchsurfing contrast their offerings with more conventional forms of travelling and accommodation in hotels. Experiencing a city, living like a local and meeting people of the local community are the elements that differentiate these brands and create authentic experiences. Paulauskaite, Powell, Coca-Stefaniak & Morrison (2017) acknowledge the relationship between the authentic and the local experiences. The tendency of these brands to show travelers' local integration connects with one central dynamic feature that these brands have, building authentic travelling experiences, which is going to be analyzed in depth in the following section.

This outcome shows that the engaged orientation of travel cybermediaries to present travelers' local integration is one of the components of their brand identity that these brands express on Instagram through UGC. The user-created images and caption of this sub-theme are focusing on the local art, design, culture, cuisine and traditions as well as on the impact of locals and hosts in the local experience.

4.2. Dynamic features and expressions

By analyzing the Instagram posts of Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK, their dynamic features and expressions came into view as central elements of the brand

identities these brands are expressing on Instagram. This theme reveals that travel cybermediaries repost UGC to present their dynamic features while they also include dynamic expressions in the captions. Like the previous theme, this core category also gives an answer to the first sub-question on the ways that travel cybermediaries are expressing their brand identities through UGC on Instagram.

To further explain, in the majority of the data, travel cybermediaries are presented as brands that offer authentic travelling experiences, exclusive app features and accommodation options as well as practical travel recommendations, information, and tips. These findings are connected with the notion of "competences", which is considered a component of brand identity in the corporate brand identity matrix (Urde, 2013). To Urde (2013), the addition of competences in the matrix confers strategic relevance as it contributes to the creation and maintenance of sustainable competitive advantage. In other words, Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK, by presenting their capabilities and services through UGC, they are trying to highlight their competitive advantage, and subsequently a critical aspect of their brand identity.

Another part of the data illustrates that travel cybermediaries are including dynamic expressions in their posts in an effort to communicate their active and youthful personality and their intimate connection with user identity. In the corporate brand identity matrix, Urde (2013) highlights that the personality is the combination of human characteristics and qualities that form the corporate character. Additionally, relationships, and how they are developing over time, reflect and define a corporate brand identity (Urde, 2013). In this research, the results are based on the expressions of the companies which are defined as the unique and special ways in which brands are communicating, in a manner that enables the audiences to recognize them from a distance (Urde, 2013). In the cases of Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK, through their dynamic expressions their active and youthful personality is acknowledged while their intimate connection to consumer identity becomes evident.

4.2.1. Authentic travel experiences

One of the primary dynamic features that differentiates the travel cybermediaries from traditional solutions and other competitive brands is the fact that they do not only mediate between suppliers and travelers but also, they provide authentic travel experiences. It is proven by data that this feature is integral in how Airbnb and

Couchsurfing express their brand identity through UGC, but it does not seem to be prominent in the Instagram account of KAYAK. This could be explained by the fact that KAYAK is a platform which connects traditional suppliers such as hotels and hostels with prospective guests.

Authenticity is a valuable asset for brands (Schroeder, 2007). Particularly, in the travel, leisure and hospitality sector, the concept of authenticity is of utmost importance as more meaningful social interactions with locals and unique experiences in authentic settings drive travelers to travel more often, stay longer, and participate in more activities (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016). Therefore, Airbnb and Couchsurfing repost and curate UGC in a way that promotes this dynamic feature as their advantage. Specifically, Couchsurfing is the only brand out of the three that posts words from users as captions and shares actual past guests' experiences. Travelers are describing their best experiences as Couchsurfers, during which they met new people, they experienced the local culture and felt genuine emotions. In Figure 7, Couchsurfing shares the story of Ash (@ashley.wandering) who created new friendships during her solo trip, after having a local tasting with the people she met.

On the contrary, Airbnb promotes the authentic travelling experiences users could have if they booked their accommodation through their platform. The brand mainly focuses on creating travelling images to the users. As an example, their captions provide concrete descriptions of a day spent in the location or house shown in the user-generated post, such as how to live like the locals, what activities they could do, what food they could cook, and tips on how they could fully enjoy the features of the property to have an original experience. Paulauskaite et al. (2017) have found that immersion in the local culture is perceived as authentic by Airbnb users. In Figure 7, Airbnb recommends that after a full day hiking in the Acadia National park, travelers could experience something unique. They could barbeque back at their "lawn", after going to buy "the catch of the day" in the "local wharf".

Figure 7: Airbnb and Couchsurfing promoting authentic travelling experiences

In general, both Airbnb and Couchsurfing link home-cooked food with having an authentic travelling experience. Airbnb highlights that users can cook in their home or on the fire at their garden, and even attempt to prepare a local dish themselves, while Couchsurfing gives value in the exchange of culinary knowledge between travelers and their hosts. Local foods are considered as authentic products that symbolize the place and culture of the destination (Sims, 2009).

Likewise, in a vast amount of its posts, Airbnb associates the authentic travelling experiences with the accommodation while, as shown in Figure 8, the posts of Couchsurfing focus on the influence of hosts. Though, in Figure 8 as well, Airbnb makes an exception and gives emphasis on the host Rachel, who is part of a special category of experienced hosts, called "superhosts", who create extraordinary experiences for their guests. Previous research has proven that the interaction with hosts is leading to authentic travelling experience (Paulauskaite et al., 2017).

Figure 8: Airbnb and Couchsurfing hosts creating an authentic travelling experience

Overall, in the majority of the posts the engaged orientation of brands to present strong human connections and travelers' local integration, is related to how these brands are expressing their dynamic feature of providing authentic travel experiences. So, the human and local factor are presented as key elements of an authentic travelling experience. This sub-theme shows that two out of three of the cases of this research, namely Airbnb and Couchsurfing, are promoting the fact that they provide authentic travelling experience as their dynamic feature, and consequently, as a component of the brand identity they express through UGC on Instagram.

4.2.2. Exclusive app features, services and accommodation options

By examining the Instagram posts, the exclusive app features, services and accommodation options were recognized as the second sub-category of the dynamic features that Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK are showing on Instagram. The majority of the data prove that, mainly, Airbnb and KAYAK, connect their services with the notion of exclusivity, which appears to have two different dimensions. On the one hand, KAYAK, as well as Airbnb and Couchsurfing in limited parts of the data, present their app features and services as if they are exclusively available in their

platforms. Limited accessibility and rarity are the stepping stones of exclusivity as they create a sense of desirability (Hennigs, Wiedmann & Klarmann, 2012). On the other hand, Airbnb links exclusivity with higher quality, luxurious and unique accommodation options. Yeoman (2012) points out that with the arrival of mass tourism for the middle classes the definition of luxury within tourism becomes diluted and luxury is redefined as exclusivity. The authenticity of travelling experiences which is boosted by the alternative ways of accommodation is also connected with exclusivity. By sharing their exclusive features, travel cybermediaries seem to express their competitive advantage, which, according to Urde (2013), is an integral element of brand identities.

All brands, Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK, are referring to special features and tools of their platform. Airbnb promotes the 'AirbnbPlus' section of the platform which is a tier of homes which provides an exclusive experience with beautiful homes, verified for quality, and exceptional hosts. Figure 9 provides an example of the promotion of this feature. In the same vein, Couchsurfing mainly focuses on promoting the 'Hangouts' section of their app, addressing the solo travelers' need for human connection and local experiences. A similar tool is promoted also by KAYAK, and it is named 'KAYAK Rendezvous'. With this tool, users can enter two home cities and this will suggest new and exciting destinations to meet up with long distance partners, family and friends.

Generally, in comparison to Airbnb and Couchsurfing, KAYAK is the brand that mostly promotes its app features and services as its competitive advantage. This can be explained by the fact that KAYAK is a meta search website that connects suppliers with travelers. Hence, their website has to utilize the latest tools for more efficient searches and more personalized results compared to their competitors. Indicatively in a considerable number of posts, KAYAK urges its users to utilize app features such as the 'KAYAK Explore' and 'KAYAK Travel Hacker' which shows, among other things, the monthly 'Deal Destinations' with the cheapest ten destinations for each month. In Figure 9, another compelling app feature of KAYAK, named 'KAYAK Trip Stats' is presented. 'Trip Stats' is a unique feature which gives a personal touch as it calculates things like how far individual users have flown, how many time zones they have visited, and how many sleeps they have spent away from home. Finally, yet importantly, all brands refer to these services and features by writing them in the form of hashtags. As a results, these posts are available to the

people who search and want to learn more about these exclusive app features and services.
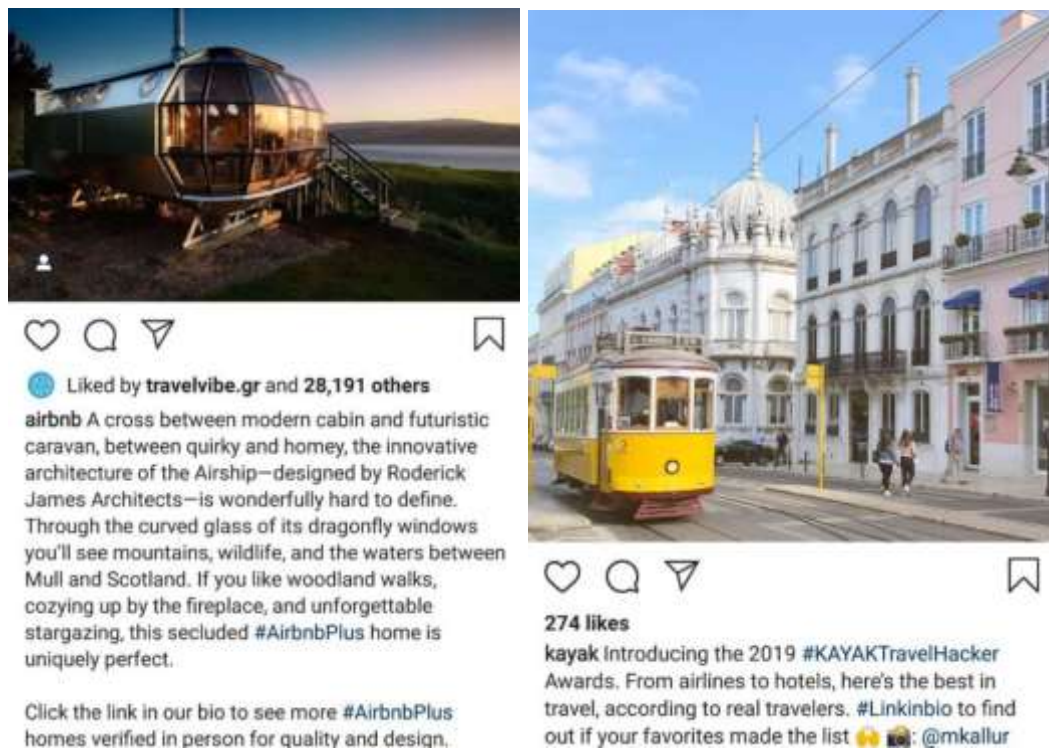
Figure 9: Airbnb and KAYAK exclusive app features

This sub-category, also, refers to the presentation of the exclusive accommodation options offered by the brands. In particular, Airbnb displays and describes its properties as its competitive advantage. Almost every analyzed post, has images of attractive properties, with stylish interior designs, cozy and sunny rooms with plants and bright colors. Often, Airbnb shows luxurious apartments with infinity pools, unique architecture and spectacular views. In addition, they present the different amenities of the properties, their living areas while in a few cases they share when the house comes with assisting personnel. Except for the design, Airbnb promotes the location of the property as an advantage depending on the image. Therefore, a city apartment is presented as an ideal place for strolling around at the heart of the center whereas a secluded property is described as a relaxing retreat. Figure 10 shows a related example of Airbnb showcasing a luxurious centrally-located city apartment with a breathtaking view.

The fact that Airbnb and Couchsurfing provide accommodation to local hosts' properties, which lead to authentic travelling experiences, is presented as unique and exclusive. Both brands stress out that their accommodation options generate a homey

feeling. Research has shown that a home-like interior design and atmosphere can contribute to a genuine travelling experience (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). Often background information is given about the houses which boosts the authentic travelling experience, and highlights the uniqueness of the properties. Great importance is placed when the property is family owned, renovated or when there is an intriguing story prior to its transformation into an Airbnb. For example, in Figure 10, Airbnb shares that Angela has transformed a 1920s tram into a living space.

Figure 10: Airbnb showing exclusive accommodation options

This finding shows that travel cybermediaries are presenting their exclusive app features, services and accommodation options through UGC on Instagram as part of their dynamic features. These results are another element of the brand identity that Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK express on Instagram through UGC.

4.2.3. Practical travel recommendations, information and tips.

A considerable part of the data suggests that another dynamic feature of travel cybermediaries is the fact that they include helpful destination and sightseeing information, travel recommendations and booking tips in the captions of user created posts, a practice that differentiates them positively from their competitors. Generally, social media play a significant role as sources of information for travelers (Xiang &

Gretzel, 2010). Thereby, these practical travel recommendations, information and tips shows that Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK, express their brand identity in ways that the audience will perceive them as sources of information on Instagram.

First and foremost, all three brands, inspired by the area depicted in the user-generated image, give destination-related information to users. More specifically, travel cybermediaries share descriptions and details about the location of the destination as well as about the popularity of the area in terms of how crowded it will be for prospective travelers. They are also sharing the reasons why an area might be well-known, which, among others, could be a famous national sight, local activities, the local cuisine, the cultural diversity and many more. Primarily, Airbnb focuses more on giving information about the contemporary life in the local neighborhoods, the museums and the galleries worth visiting, as shown in Figure 11. KAYAK on the other hand is trying to highlight the uniqueness of the destination which might stem from random reasons, for example from the fact that the area offers pet-friendly options to the fact that it does not observe Daylight Saving Time. By the same token, the majority of Instagram posts of Couchsurfing is shedding light on general geographical information, on the hidden gems of an area, as well as, on the evolution of a natural area through the years.

Apart giving useful destination information, the brands through their Instagram accounts are recommending travel destinations and activities during the trip. Airbnb even makes food-related recommendations and KAYAK gives very specific trip examples with actual prices. It is also is mentioning almost in every post flight, car rental and hotel booking tips as well as ways of traveling on a budget. The brand even includes statistical data of price drops in flight fares and hotels, as indicated. Furthermore, Couchsurfing focuses on exploration tips, from the best transportation options to how much time it will take to finish a certain hiking route. on Figure 11.
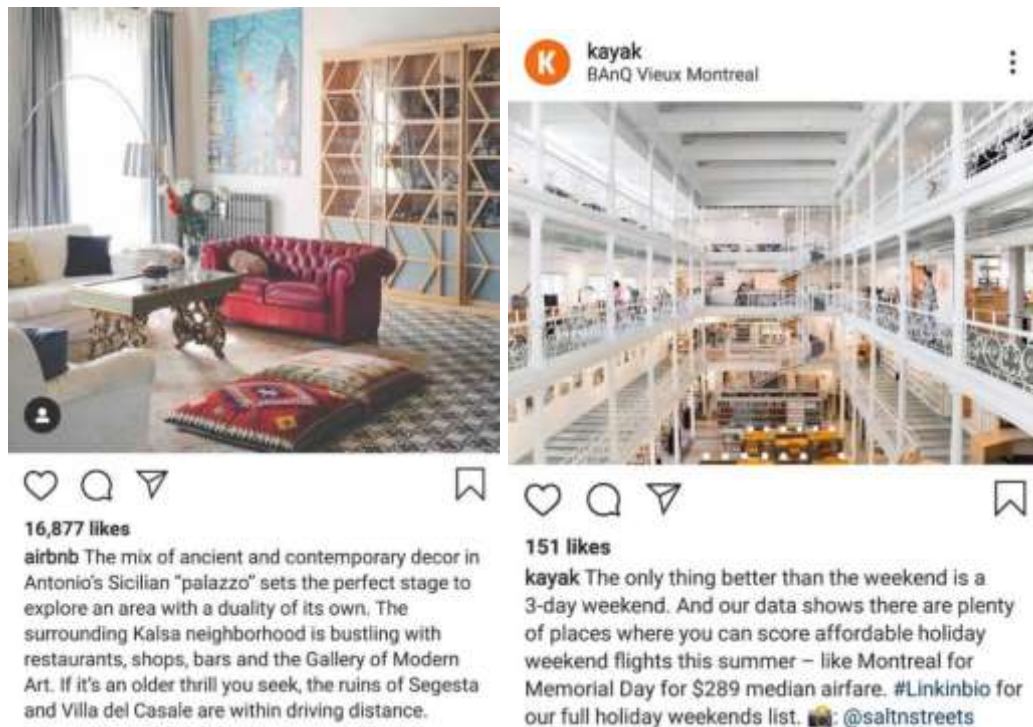
Figure 11: Airbnb's distribution of destination information

In addition, Couchsurfing is distributing general descriptions and information on various archaeological and historical sights. Among other things, the brand is posting historic information. A related example is the one shown in Figure 12, which includes a caption with a detailed analysis of the history of Topkapi Palace and its Tile Kiosk. It is worth noting that KAYAK and Couchsurfing are writing the names of the destinations in the form of hashtags, which means that both companies are trying to target with their posts travelers who are searching and possibly will be travelling soon to the area. In Figure 12, for instance, the names of destinations are written as #istanbul and #turkey.

By examining the Instagram posts, the practical travel recommendations, information and tips that travel cybermediaries share on Instagram through UGC emerged as a sub-category of the dynamic features of Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK. This point shows that travel cybermediaries express the informative and advisory aspect of their brand identity through UGC, a dynamic feature that differentiates them from their competitors.

Figure 12: Couchsurfing providing historic information

4.2.4. Active and youthful personality.

It is also derived from the data that travel cybermediaries are promoting their active and youthful brand personality through the way they express themselves via UGC and the branded captions. As mentioned earlier, in the corporate brand identity matrix, Urde (2013) highlights that the personality is the combination of human characteristics and qualities that form the corporate character. Aaker (1996b) noted that the brand may be viewed as a person that is competent, trustworthy, active, or youthful. In this research, the findings are based on the dynamic expressions of the three companies. The active and youthful personality is an additional component of the brand identity that Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK are promoting on Instagram.

The active character of the brands is evident through the fact that they appear as self-promotional. To begin with, the brands often include their name as a hashtag in the caption which promotes their posts in the audience that searches for them with the brand name as keyword. As a whole, they integrate various hashtags in an effort to self-promote and grow their audiences, as it was demonstrated in the previous sections. Airbnb and KAYAK are incorporating various hashtags in the captions within the sentences. Airbnb writes exclusively its app features in the form of hashtags while KAYAK except for its features also writes the shown destinations as

hashtags. Besides, KAYAK includes a block of hashtags in the first comment under its posts. Though, the analysis of the comments is not under the scope of this research. In contrast, Couchsurfing, has a block of the same 25 to 30 hashtags under the main caption of every analyzed post. Namely, a few of these hashtags are #couchsurfing, #couchsurfingfriendship, #passportready, #adventuretime and #exploretheworld. There are mainly five categories of hashtags that Couchsurfing uses and these are the following: areas as hashtags, brand as hashtag, friendship hashtag, urge to share hashtag and travel-related hashtags.

In approximately one fourth of the posts, brands express in ways that are humorous, fun and playful. By these dynamic expressions, it can be assumed that brands do not want to be projected as strict corporate entities but as youthful and active organizations, to seem more informal and closer to the users. The playful and fun character of the brands is shown by the humorous comments that they often make in their posts. Airbnb makes humorous comments that are related to the properties, Couchsurfing attempts to joke about the experience of living with strangers while KAYAK mainly comments in a lighthearted way on how necessary vacations are, despite any other obligations of adult life. Figure 13 illustrates explicitly the humorous vibe behind the captions of KAYAK and Airbnb.

Figure 13: Humorous captions by Airbnb and KAYAK

The company even includes emojis within the sentences of its captions to make them more vibrant whereas Couchsurfing, following a similar practice, reposts pictures that have stickers on top of them. In addition, the latter also tries to use the terminology of the youth in its captions. The brand is referring to "trip goals" to curate the user generated image. Nowadays, modern society has been obsessed with the term "goals", giving this label to anything and everything they wish to achieve. Additionally, the brands through the user-generated images that are selecting, are trying to demonstrate their youthful and fun character. Hammocks and swings in nature, karaoke nights, smiling faces and many more are appearing repeatedly in the data and show that the brands are not only trying to promote their fun personality but also the fun accompanying their services.

Last but not least, the active personality of travel cybermediaries has stemmed from the data that show the effort of brands to stay up-to-date and relevant to the current events. KAYAK is the brand that mainly follows this practice, as it refers to matters of the ongoing daily life such as the Day Time change and even makes pop-culture references to TV shows such as Game of Thrones. KAYAK links these references with an urge to travel more. In Figure 14, KAYAK is mentioning the royal baby's birth, and the fact that he has probably travelled more than the average traveler. The caption closes with a call to use the 'KAYAK Trip Stats' feature in order for the users to count the miles that they have travelled and then compare them to the royal baby's ones.

In addition to the above, KAYAK presents international days and national holidays as another opportunity for travelling. The brand refers to the International Women's Day, Easter, the Valentine's day as occasions to plan a trip. Final but of equal value are the respective hashtags, which were also trending at that time, such as #InternationalWomenDay, #LoveYourPetDay, #HappyValentinesDay, #GroundhodDay etc , are accompanying the relevant posts of KAYAK. Figure 14 provides the relevant example.

Figure 14: KAYAK remains relevant to up-to-date events

All in all, this sub-theme shows that travel cybermediaries express their active and youthful personality as an integral component of their brand identity through UGC that includes dynamic expressions that differentiate them from their competitors.

4.2.5. Intimate connection to consumer identity

One critical finding of the content analysis of the user generated Instagram posts is that travel cybermediaries seem to express their intimate relationship with consumer identity. Taking into consideration the corporate identity matrix, relationships, and how they are built over time, reflect and define a corporate brand identity (Urde, 2013). This emerging sub-category shows that travel cybermediaries are expressing their brand identity by presenting and developing their intimate bond to consumer identity through dynamic expressions that differentiate them from competitors.

Mainly, the intimate relationship between consumers and the brand is evident by how the brands are communicating with their users and other stakeholders in a considerable part of the dataset. In many cases, the brands are addressing directly the users, the creators of the posts or even the hosts. Especially KAYAK is a brand which

often addresses personally a part of its audience. In Figure 16, KAYAK greets its users in second person and encourages them to interact by commenting under the post. All companies also give credits in the images that they repost from users, opening a direct channel of communication with the original creators. Even though analyzing comments was not part of the data analysis process, in many occasions the creators have thanked the brand for sharing their posts in the comments section after they have been tagged by the brand. Furthermore, in the majority of the posts by KAYAK, the brand seems that is close to the travelers' needs, and generally that they are joined with the user. For instance, in Figure 16, KAYAK takes care that its users' needs are "covered".

490 likes

kayak If #Hawaii is on your travel list but you're skeptical of the cost, we got you covered. With new flight routes, convenient public transportation and tasty local eats, there are plenty of ways to save. For tips, •• our story or the #linkinbio. 📷: @coralouellette

258 likes

kayak Hey you, comment an emoji and we'll tell you where you should travel this summer 😋 (via @robjbye)

Figure 16: KAYAK addressing directly users, being close to consumers' needs and encouraging comments

Furthermore, Couchsurfing shares user endorsements or, in other words, their positive expressions about the brand's services as its content in an effort to show that users are experiencing an intimate connection with the brand identity as well. In one particular example, a Couchsurfer expressed his adoration to the brand by tattooing the logo of Couchsurfing on his skin. As shown in Figure 17, Couchsurfing uploaded the picture. Except for this extreme example, the brand is also demonstrating how they are being praised by their users. For example, Couchsurfing uses as captions, the Couchsurfers' description of travelling experiences, which includes compliments to

the brand and gives an insight on how much they have gained using this platform. In Figure 16, the brand, using the words of a user (@carlson.how_epic), expresses "How amazing Couchsurfing is, bringing friendships together across every corner of the world [...]".

couchsurfing "Three years ago, I did Couchsurfing hangout with two Vietnamese strangers, Phu and Vy, this was the first time we met, we took a wefie at the roadside of a grilled seafood stall. And now we are good friends, we constantly visit each other, we call each other Anh and Em trai (which is brother in Vietnamese) sleep over Vy's house several times, meeting his English teacher who is a New Zealander and his adopted Vietnamese child Peanut, attended Phu's wedding, witness his marriage, visit his hometown and become his parents' friend too, and now many of their friends are my friends too, they even give me a spare bike to ride around the town whenever I go there too.
How amazing Couchsurfing is, bringing friendship together across every corner of the world, and the most awesome part is, everyone comes with a genuine heart. I learn so much through this platform and I appreciate everything I have. 🇻🇳"
📷 @carlson.how_epic

1,004 likes
couchsurfing It's hard to think of a clearer way to tell the world that you Couchsurf than getting our logo inked into your skin. We're impressed Marc! Obviously we're very flattered, but what we love most is that you share this tattoo with Tiina (@tiiwik). Big love to both of you.
📷 @marcanthonyhopkins

Figure 17: Couchsurfing sharing user endorsements

Based on the analysis of the data, not only the brands are showing their current close connection to their users but they are also trying to create fruitful ground for future communication in an attempt to further develop the intimate connection with their customers. More specifically, the brands seem to leveraging engagement by encouraging tagging, commenting and sharing by users, as demonstrated in Figure 16. In another post, Couchsurfing is asking what the signature karaoke tunes of their audience are, followed by the urge to leave a comment. KAYAK follows the same practice more actively than Couchsurfing. Furthermore, approximately half of KAYAK's analyzed posts encourage the users to check the brand's Instagram stories and link in bio for an option to learn more about a specific topic.

This sub-theme shows that travel cybermediaries are presenting their intimate connection with consumers and users through UGC on Instagram as a form of their dynamic expressions. These results are another element of the brand identity that Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK express on Instagram through UGC.

4.3. Attaching experiential and functional benefits to the brands

After conducting and analyzing the interviews, the data showed that a great number of the interviewees' brand associations relates to the personal value that they had attached to the services of the brands. Perceptions of brand image also include the brand value that consumers attach in a brand (Yuan, Liu, Luo, & Yen, 2016). To Keller (1993), the personal value consists of all the benefits users link to a brand or, in other words, what consumers think a particular product or service can do for them. These are second-level brand associations that result in perceiving a brand image in a certain way. Therefore, attaching experiential and functional benefits to the brands surfaced as the first core category that provides an answer to the second sub-question of this research on how young adults are perceiving the brand images of travel cybermediaries.

A product or a service can have experiential benefits which relate to what it feels like to use them and satisfy needs such as sensory pleasure, variety, and cognitive stimulation (Keller, 1993). In this research, the deep human connection, the genuine and local experiences, as well as the travel inspiration were identified as the experiential benefits that young adults place on travel cybermediaries. Functional benefits are the most practical advantages that follow product or service consumption. These benefits often are interrelated with fairly basic motivations, such as covering physiological and safety needs. The data showed that participants regard travel cybermediaries as providers of convenient, flexible, and cost reducing services. Last but not least, many interviewees acknowledged the surprise factor of these brands. To be more precise, a lot of them experience a strong sense of insecurity when travelling with these companies which might be perceived either as a concerning or as an exciting element of the brand image of Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK. During the interviews, it was evident that these perceptions were based both on the services of travel cybermediaries as well as on their social media presence and user created posts.

4.3.1. Deep human connection

The majority of interviewees have associated travel cybermediaries with the formulation of deep human connections, an element that apparently makes these brands stand out from other more traditional solutions such as hotels in the users'

minds. First and foremost, as shown in numerous quotes, Airbnb is considered to be ideal for renting by large groups of friends, meaning that the already existing relationships are strengthened. Even interviewees that mainly prefer hotels, admitted that when travelling in bigger numbers they prefer to rent an Airbnb. Additionally, Anna (26 years old) and Anastasia (25 years old), comment that, in their eyes, Airbnb is ideal for couples as it gives the opportunity to feel like they are leaving together in a foreign country, which, also builds towards a more genuine travelling experience.

By the same token, the friendly and helpful hosts are being acknowledged as part of the social dimension of Airbnb and create the perception that the platform enables human connection through new friendships. This interaction with hosts creates, also, authentic travelling experience (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). To illustrate this point, Anastasia, a 25-year old travel enthusiast, describes a positive experience she had with Airbnb due to her host's friendly attitude:

> [...] the owner came to us and he was like, whatever you want, feel free to what's app me. He was also very young. I think he was in his thirties so he was like, if you need something, like if you girls need eeeh company for the night to..., to show you at a bar or something. So [...] even made me feel like I made friends, you know? For example, I know if I go to London again, and I don't have anyone, I will text this guy and say, [...] 'are you by any chance here? Can we get a drink or something?' You know, it's social. (Anastasia, 25)

The final phrase, "it's social" confirms once more that in the participants' minds travel cybermediaries boost human relationships. Generally, this social aspect is considered as positive. However, the same interviewee, also shares an incident she had with another Airbnb host, during which she was stood up. She concludes her story by stating that the human factor could have downsides:

> It's human [...] you get good points and bad points from the human aspect (Anastasia, 25).

One other interviewee, Laura (25 years old) also points out the fact that the captions of Airbnb sometimes include background information about the hosts, offering an insight to their personal stories in an effort to create a sense of familiarity to them. For the most part, participants seem to think of Airbnb as a brand that

promotes the human connection by showing and referring to the impact of attentive hosts in the travelling experience through user-created posts.

The same observation applies to Couchsurfing even to a bigger extent, as many of the participants have noticed that its Instagram feed is flooded with images showing reunited Couchsurfers and new friendships. Nick (25 years old) has observed that the Instagram feed of Couchsurfing shares posts about travelers meeting each other:

> Because they (Couchsurfing) always tell you stories about the people that you meet, [...] using Couchsurfing. Aah for example as I met, this Spanish guy and we had some beers. They have stories from Couchsurfing. They use it, they meet some people, they travel with these people. So, this is the kind of stories. (Nick, 25)

To continue, many interviewees assume that communication with the host is an integral part of the Couchsurfing experience in comparison to the other two brands. Laura (25 years old), a previous Couchsurfing host, explains that the guests in Couchsurfing are usually dependent on the hosts, which, according to Jan (27 years old), creates a strong "emotional experience" both for the host and the guest. Furthermore, Laura provides a new dimension to the topic. She explains that showing respect and adjusting to the hosts' needs is critical to bond with them. More specifically, she mentions:

> The only thing that's different with Couchsurfing and Airbnb is that you are at the host's house. So they're a bit, you have to be ready to adjust a bit more, you are in their home, so you just have to be ready to, first of all, communicate more than in Airbnb [...] In Couchsurfing you have of course, you have to, I mean, to communicate [...] with the person that provides you the couch actually, and you have to adjust a bit more [...] (Laura, 25)

The above findings are aligned with the research of Yannopoulou et al. (2013) who have argued that the notion of human relationships is the basis of the brand identity of Couchsurfing and Airbnb. What is more, the findings are in accordance with the results from the previous part of the research. Travel cybermediaries are reflecting their brand identity by expressing their orientation for strong human connections. This sub-theme shows that young adults are attaching the experiential

benefit of deep human connections to Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK. Therefore, young adults seem to perceive the brand image in the same way as travel cybermediaries are conveying their brand identity through UGC.

4.3.2. Genuine and local experiences

The vast number majority of interviewees have linked travel cybermediaries with genuine and local experiences, a component which causes these brands to stand out from other more conventional services as for example hotels in the participants' thinking. These perceptions are stemming both from participants' experiences but, also, from the UGC, that travel cybermediaries post on their Instagram feeds. This sub-theme is related prominently with the idea that interviewees have for Airbnb and Couchsurfing.

In the first place, a great number of interviewees mention that they prefer to travel with travel cybermediaries as they feel that the brand experience provides a privileged access to the local neighborhoods, people, and culture. Both Laura (25 years old) and Anastasia (25 years old) express their preference, specially to Airbnb as, in their eyes, it creates unforgettable authentic and local experiences. Paulauskaite et al. (2017) acknowledge the relationship between the authentic and the local experiences as well. Additionally, Philip (29 years old) and Kevin (28 years old) favor Airbnb because it creates a home-like experience. Anastasia, describing a former Airbnb experience, says that she felt like she was at a "home away from home" due to the host's personal touches in the interior design, showing that interviewees feel that they get a more authentic experience. Research confirms that a home-like interior design and atmosphere can contribute to an authentic travelling experience (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). Both of the above points, the local integration and the home-like feeling lead to genuine experiences, as illustrated in the following sentence by Maria:

> Well, Airbnb is one of my favorite ways to travel and find accommodations. I really like the idea behind it. I like I can choose a home and I feel more like a local in the city. (Maria, 26)

At another point of her interview, Maria admits that, to her, living at a local's home is the "main advantage" of Airbnb. Many interviewees expressed that

Couchsurfing offers the ultimate authentic and local experience. Jan even compares the originality and authenticity of Couchsurfing experiences with the ones of Airbnb and Booking.com:

> Eee you can eeee get to know closer with the local culture. You can eeee get to know closer with the local habits. Every single time I was staying on Couchsurfing I was learning and I was experiencing something I wouldn't experience eee staying in a commercial accommodation. People [...] who are your hosts, they [...] want to show you their part of life and this is something original you will not find on [...] an Airbnb, eeee neither Airbnb nor on Booking (Jan, 27)

Authenticity is a feature of paramount importance in the travel, leisure and hospitality sector. More meaningful social interactions with locals and unique experiences in authentic settings drive travelers to travel more frequently, to extend their visit, and to be more active (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016). Therefore, the fact that participants attach this experiential benefit to these brands show that they perceive their brand image the brand image more positively.

Another interesting finding from the interviews is that participants are recognizing, the effort of the brands to promote the local and genuine experiences that they provide in the user-created Instagram posts. Specifically, Anna mentions that through UGC the local and authentic experiences of other users create the perception that these brands provide genuine experiences:

> I like the fact that ammm they ammm like get and I don't know how, well get, user generated content you know to to to actually promote their services because then this local experience what I'm talking about is transferred to me through for example Instagram through the local experiences of other people (Anna, 26).

The findings are aligned with the results from the previous part of the research. As it became evident in the preceding sections, Travel cybermediaries are expressing their brand identity through UGC by introducing heir orientation for local integration and the authentic travelling experiences as their dynamic feature. This sub-theme shows that young adults are attaching the experiential benefit of genuine and local experiences to Airbnb and Couchsurfing, and KAYAK. As a result, young

adults seem to perceive the brand image in the same way as travel cybermediaries are expressing their brand identity through UGC.

4.3.3. Travel inspiration and information

Through the analysis of the interviews, participants seem to consider travel cybermediaries, not only via their Instagram accounts but also through their websites, as sources of inspiration and information about their trips. Above all, interviewees have understood that brands are trying to promote the travelling experience and urge their audience to travel by posting travel-related inspirational and informative UGC. The linkage of this experiential benefit to Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK shows that participants regard these brands positively.

About KAYAK and Couchsurfing, interviewees find the user-generated posts that are place-focused and present scenery appealing and inspiring to visit new places. In particular, Jan feels that he gets ideas for new places that he could visit from the Instagram account of KAYAK. Maria gets also travel inspiration from the Instagram account of Couchsurfing but, interestingly, even though she is inspired to travel, she is not inspired to travel using Couchsurfing. All in all, few find inspiring that Couchsurfing posts the traveling experiences of everyday travelers. However, Wei, along with most of the interviewees, expresses his preference for the previously mentioned place-focused content, while he compares it with the selfies that Couchsurfing posts:

> I think maybe just because of the beautiful pictures, the images. When you, when they were like really beautiful it was like 'oh shock. Like oh this city is really nice' and they give you some inspiration that maybe someday I should plan a trip to that city because based on the pictures right now this is nice or whatever. And.... I think Couchsurfing don't give you that much inspiration. They always share a bunch of group people taking selfies together. (Wei, 27)

Except for destinations and scenery, participants are inspired by the fun aspect of these brands. To be more precise, KAYAK is perceived by Kevin as a "fun group" of people who post travel inspiring pictures followed by fun quotes. This observation is connected with the previous finding that travel cybermediaries express their fun and youthful personality through UGC in order to present their brand identity to the

audiences. In addition, interviewees seem to have this perception that KAYAK is informative by the fact that it often includes in the caption travel hacks and tips. Julia, in particular, assumes that this is an attempt of KAYAK to interact with the users and create a more intimate relationship.

As to Airbnb, many participants felt that they were inspired by the whole atmosphere that the brand tries to convey through their Instagram posts. Anastasia, in particular, felt that, through Airbnb's UGC and its branded captions, she can imagine herself being in the house that is displayed. She explains this in depth in the following quote:

> Like a nice corner of the house with a nice, I don't know, flowers, books. That's what I can think of. Something ...pleasing to see something you can imagine yourself being there, like reading your book or watching Netflix or chilling with your friends, having a coffee. (Anastasia, 25)

In general, the above findings are in accordance with previous literature and research. Specifically, UGC is considered amongst the most significant sources of information for travelers when making a purchasing decision (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Mackay & Vogt, 2012). Furthermore, leisure travelers use social media for advice and inspiration on possible destinations, with more than one-third of these also searching for UGC to get ideas for attractions, vacation activities and hotels (eMarketer, 2013).

4.3.4. Convenient, flexible, and cost reducing services

Another benefit that the majority of interviewees have attached to travel cybermediaries is the fact that they provide convenient, flexible, and cost reducing services. Participants seem to perceive these brands as functional services that are close to their users by facilitating the travelling experience in practical ways. Recent research has shown that customers are attracted to Airbnb mainly by its practical, and less by its experiential attributes (Guttentag, Smith, Potwarka, & Havitz, 2017). The variety of open codes under this sub-theme confirms that users are placing great importance in the functional benefits of travel cybermediaries.

To start, all interviewees feel that booking is much easier through online booking platforms, meaning that they have a positive perception of these brands. In

particular, Kevin, describing his experience with Airbnb and KAYAK, mentions the following:

> Ever since I went to university, I have been travelling a little more, eem using platforms such as Airbnb and Kayak. Eeeem very fruitful platforms for me because [...] they just make the whole booking experience a lot easier. [...] these platforms came up which basically do all the work for you (Kevin, 28).

Regarding KAYAK, many interviewees acknowledge that the platform facilitates their travelling experience as they can book flights, accommodation and car rentals all together. Moreover, they appreciate its user-friendly, flexible website, with the interesting categorization of deal destinations as it helps them to find their ideal destination according to their preferences. Concerning Airbnb, a significant number of interviewees have praised the platform for offering nice features on its website. Anna, for example, mentioned that she likes the fact that the platform gives the opportunity to chat with the hosts before, during and after a trip. In addition, the same interviewee distinguishes the platform from traditional solutions as it is faster. One additional functional benefit that interviewees have given to Airbnb is its convenient, clean, and spacious accommodation solutions. Overall, flexibility and convenience are perceived as central assets of these brands and, according to a research on Airbnb, users value these features (Priporas, Stylos, Rahimi, & Vedanthachari, 2017).

Another critical functional benefit that the interviewees have attached to the brands is the fact they are cost reducing. To further explain, most of the respondents feel that the main advantage of these brands is the fact that they provide cheap accommodation solutions. As far as Couchsurfing is concerned, interviewees have mixed feelings. More than half of the interviewees consider that the free accommodation that Couchsurfing provides is its competitive advantage over other solutions. Kevin in particular mentions that the free accommodation worldwide gives the opportunity to travel for longer periods of time. Wei, a 27-year-old former Coushsurfer, confirms the latter and, when he described his last summer Euro trip, he confessed that he used Couchsurfing to be able to travel more:

> Aaaaah, I used Couchsurfing. [...] I would do that because it's a long trip. You know to spend that much money on the accommodation. (Wei, 27)

However, Anastasia is skeptical over the brand as she says the following:

Okay. Eeeh, for me Couchsurfing is the solution of the ...(laughing)...poor. (laughing). [...] Because you can find so many options, even hostels for 10 euros per night (Anastasia, 25)

In regard to Airbnb, four out of ten interviewees expressed that the platform offers the cheapest solution when travelling with big groups of friends. Julia for example, even though she is all about luxurious travelling, loves the fact that when she travels with her friends and rents an Airbnb, she can share the whole experience with them and pay less than a hotel room. According to Guttentag et al. (2017) one of the primary motivations that customers choose Airbnb in their travels is its low cost. Half of the interviewees mentioned that the advantage of Airbnb is the fact that it provides accommodation solutions for every budget, from travelers who prefer luxury to the ones who do not want pricey vacation. It is noteworthy that, Philip, except for the fact that he enjoys the value for money accommodation of Airbnb, pointed out another interesting aspect of the Airbnb brand. Not only is Airbnb cost reducing for its customers but it also brings income to the hosts, creating a "win-win situation". To be more precise, he says the following:

Airbnb, aaah, it provides it's like a win-win situation, because speaking about myself, I'm getting a nice apartment where I can use all the utilities for myself and it's a whole apartment [...] and on the other hand the person that owns the apartment makes money. So, I find it like a win-win situation (Philip, 29)

Three interviewees also stressed out the importance of the fact that through Airbnb and KAYAK secure transactions are completed. Completing secure transactions is an indicator that the participants trust the brands, as Lee, Ariff, Zakuan, Sulaiman, and Saman (2016) found. As a result, safe transactions create a positive perception about these brands. To illustrate this point, Jan, a 27-year-old travel enthusiast, mentioned:

I feel safe. I feel safe buying tickets through Kayak. I'm not afraid that somebody will steal my money or I will just like, send them via my transfer and they will disappear. No, I'm not afraid of it because I've used it so many times (Jan, 27).

Generally, disruptive innovations introduce an alternative package of benefits, generally centered on being cheaper, simpler, smaller, or more convenient (Guttentag

et al., 2017). The concept of disruptive innovation seems to apply well to travel cybermediaries as they are perceived to be convenient, flexible and relatively inexpensive by young adults. Airbnb is an actual example of disruptive innovation (Guttentag, 2015). This sub-theme shows that young adults are applying functional benefits to Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK, meaning that they perceive their brand images in a positive way.

4.3.5. The "surprise" factor

By analyzing the interviews, a great number of participants seemed to feel a strong sense of insecurity for these brands, based mainly on the feelings they have from previous experiences and stories from friends, which is related to the unknown aspect of these companies. This attribute of travel cybermediaries is perceived both as positive and negative. Apparently, even though it is included in the core category of the experiential benefits that participants are attaching to travel cybermediaries, the concerns of young adults must also be reported as they could provide a more complete insight on how they perceive the brand image of Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK.

First and foremost, many interviewees are expressing their opinion that Couchsurfing might not be as safe as the other two platforms. Seven out of ten interviewees have claimed that their major concern with Couchsurfing is safety, as the host is a unknown. Many of them have even stressed out the fact that girls and women might feel uncomfortable staying with a stranger, and that they have heard stories on the matter. This observation has also been made in Tan's (2010) analysis, which found that female Couchsurfers are more likely to think about personal safety, being more vulnerable to attacks, especially of a sexual nature. Wei, also, makes a relevant point in the following quote:

> I do hear really a lot from the travelling girls they, they mention that some weird thing happened before. So, I will portray Couchsurfing will need, definitely need to improve in the security part. (Wei, 27)

Also, half interviewees have associated Couchsurfing with the unknown, which some present it as an element of the brand image that concerns them and others as a component that excites them. Jan admits that his most positive and his most negative travelling experiences happened while he was couchsurfing. However, he

underlines that he has lived in the most amazing properties, meeting the friendliest hosts with this platform. Tan (2010), examining matters of trust within Couchsurfing urges guests to take a leap of faith knowing that there is risk involved. On the contrary, Julia, admits that this uncertainty causes her insecurity as a woman:

> Cause you don't know what you, you don't really know what you can get, right? Or what you will see when you arrive. Mmm, and for me, as a girl, no. I think I wouldn't feel comfortable and safe. (Julia, 27)

Regarding Airbnb, respondents are relating the "surprise" factor to the lack of guarantee on the amenities that will be provided. Many have expressed, for example that they do not feel that they can always trust the pictures of properties shown on the platform, while others have admitted that they had previous miscommunication problems with the hosts that causes a strong sense of insecurity.

Many interviewees have also pointed out that, as KAYAK is not a very popular brand, especially within Europe, when they used it for the first time, they had the perception that the brand is not safe as they were uncertain if they are going to receive a proof of their bookings. To illustrate this point, Anastasia narrates her first experience with KAYAK:

> Yeah, I think not many people know it (KAYAK). So maybe that was the only thing I thought, 'Is it valid?' And actually (laughing, coughing) I just remember, when I booked my first tickets from there, [...] I press pay and I hadn't received an email for five minutes and I was like, 'oh my God, I just spent 300 euros for nothing', and, 'they, they just stole my money!' and, 'I don't have a flight" and "what will I do?' (Anastasia, 25)

This finding shows that young adults perceive travel cybermediaries as brands whose services are related to the "surprise" factor, meaning that users could have unique experiences or face risks. In every occasion, participants are associating Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK with a strong sense of insecurity.

4.4. Feeling an intimate connection with the brand identity

By conducting and analyzing in-depth interviews, feeling an intimate connection with the brand identities of travel cybermediaries surfaced as a core theme. Young adults seem to think Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK as brands that generate a feeling of

closeness by reposting UGC. Specifically, participants identify these brands as trustworthy, engaging, interactive, and they are experiencing a sense familiarity. These perceived elements of the brand image create a feeling of intimate connection to the brand identity.

According to Keller (1993) attitudes, or in other words the evaluations of the brand form the basis for consumer behavior. According to Veloutsou (2015) the strength of the consumer-rand relationship is a great predictor of brand loyalty. The data show that the participants express their preference to these brands as a result of the aforementioned perceived intimate connection. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that few of the interviews regard these brands as mainstream, hence, they act indifferently towards them. This core category provides an answer to the second sub-question on how young adults perceive the brand image of travel cybermediaries through the UGC that these brands post and curate on Instagram.

4.4.1. Trustworthy brands through UGC

In-depth interviews show that young adults are experiencing an intimate connection with the brand identity due to the fact that a vast majority, indicatively eight out of ten, seem to perceive the brands as trustworthy. In their eyes, posting UGC on Instagram, is not an advertisement, as it feels more true, reliable and authentic. Previous research has provided evidence that consumers trust more UGC than traditional advertisements and other sponsored commercial messages (Kohli et al. 2015; MacKinnon, 2012; Rodgers & Wang, 2011). This point is illustrated by half of the interviewees who support that reposting user created content generates trusts. Namely, Philip, a 29-year old previous exchange student, when asked how he feels about UGC on the Instagram accounts of Airbnb and Couchsurfing, mentioned:

> It builds trust for sure [...] I find it more appealing and it makes me want to use it more. Because it also makes me feel like they care about [...] their users. (Philip, 29)

In particular, Philip feels that the trust that he feels about these brands due to UGC motivates him to continue using these brands for his future trips. This is in line with previous literature which present trust as one of the antecedents of brand loyalty (Oliver, 1999). Half of the participants have made the association that UGC is true

and, hence more reliable. According to them, users express their true feelings and experiences, and as Nick has stated "a user cannot lie", therefore, the fact that brands post UGC indicates that they can be trusted. From early research noncommercial content was perceived as more credible leading to more trust in the content created by peers (Litvin et.al, 2008)

In the same vein, UGC is often believed as more genuine, because it is produced by actual satisfied users. Professional photography may look attractive but the photos taken by travelers are more likely to match a prospective visitor's own experience when visiting the place and booking a similar service. In particular, for Maria (25 years old) the actual travelling experience is going to be "like the picture", if that image is UGC. Anna, a 26-year old travel enthusiast, connects the notion of authenticity with trust:

> It's definitely more authentic and it makes me feel like I can trust the brands. (Anna, 26)

Two other interviewees introduce a new dimension to the concept of trust. According to them UGC generates trust for a brand as it entails that a great number of satisfied customers took the time to post about their positive experience with the brand. Essentially, brands only post a limited number of posts from an endless repository of user-created images. Laura (25 years old), illustrated this point, by saying that posts from happy customers are additional advertisements for Airbnb and Couchsurfing.

> That's an ad for them [...] if you have the whole content made by your [...] satisfied customers, that's an ad itself (Laura, 25)

This finding shows that young adults perceive travel cybermediaries as trustworthy through the UGC that they post. Trust generate the feeling of an intimate connection with the brand identity, which subsequently connects with a positive perception of the brand image of Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK.

4.4.2. Engaging and interactive brands through UGC

While analyzing the interviews, the engaging and interactive aspect of brands was introduced as an element of the perceived brand image of travel cybermediaries.

Travel cybermediaries are regarded as brands that, through UGC, generate engagement and interaction and, for this reason, they create an intimate relationship with their audiences. According to Hambick and Kang (2015), brands that manage UGC build stronger relationships with consumers and elicit greater engagement on social media. Specifically, interviewees refer to the different things that, to their opinion, show the engaging and interactive aspect of travel cybermediaries.

Initially, in term of the content on their Instagram accounts, eight out of ten interviewees mention that the image is the first thing that draws attention to a post and motivates them to become involved. According to the participants, visually pleasing images such as beautiful views, bright colors, and generally high aesthetics stimulate the participants to interact. In order to comment, like, share or send the post to a friend through direct messages, the respondents tell that they are also influenced by the branded caption. Considering that the images are user-created and the captions are branded, it seems that UGC has a positive influence in perceiving the brands as engaging. However, the fact that the format of Instagram mainly promotes the visual content should also be considered.

The fact that Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK leverage UGC on their Instagram feed is positively perceived by the participants and creates the association that these brands try to engage their audiences. All participants were able to distinguish that the images were user-generated and that the caption was created by the brand. Three interviewees revealed that UGC is the primary reason to engage and interact with the brand, as it has a backstory. Anastasia (25 years old) explained that the fact that UGC creates a story, is perceived as more personal and therefore, it stimulates users to "connect":

> Yeah. But it's really nice that they create a story like to do a storytelling about the place that's again, so personal and it makes you wanna connect with it. (Anastasia, 25)

She further commented that the extend of her engagement to UGC is so high she even clicks through when she sees an attractive property and tries to find it on the Airbnb website. Philip (29 years old) even tracks down the creator's profile.

Interviewees that have used and follow KAYAK seem to all agree that the brand is the most interactive out of the three. For example, Julia, a 27-year old female who loves staying in luxurious hotels, points out that KAYAK gives the impression

that they want to "interact with their followers" comparing to Airbnb. The perception of KAYAK as an interactive brand is, also, based on the fact that the brand includes humoristic captions, interactive stories, and deals in its posts while many interviewees have highlighted that KAYAK often urges them to comment, or check the link in bio. Kevin (28 years old) describes how he perceives the engaging and interactive vibe of KAYAK in detail:

> Kayak is just a little more like 'Hey! This is fun. So why, why don't you come join us in here and everything. We have. We have discounts, we have destinations, we have everything. We even have little small memes to make you feel happier [...] once in a while' (Kevin, 28)

This sub-theme shows that young adults regard travel cybermediaries as engaging and interactive through the UGC that they repost. As users feel motivated to engage and interact with the brands, intimate connection with the brand identity is built leading participants to establish a positive perception of the brand image of Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK.

4.4.3. Familiarity with the brands through UGC

In-depth interviews show that many participants are experiencing an intimate connection to the brand identity due to feeling familiar with the brands through their user-created posts. As mentioned previously, young adults are perceiving travel cybermediaries as trustworthy, engaging and interactive, which generate a general sense of closeness to the brand. Similarly, as these brands leverage UGC they are perceived as caring. Anastasia (25 years old) mentions that UGC makes her feel that the brands care about the voice of their customers.

> If Airbnb shared my picture, I would be excited [...] for 4 million people to see my picture. Uuuum, it's nice they, they, eh, eh also show people that they care. (Anastasia, 25)

It should be stressed that she admits her being excited in a case one of her pictures was featured in the Instagram account of Airbnb. Many interviewees have expressed the same opinion. For example, Julia (27 years old) mentions that she would feel honored if one of the brands shared her post, as millions of people would

have the chance to be inspired from her content. These emotions of excitement and honor show that participants perceive positively the brands for uploading UGC, and feel closer to them due to the fact that they have a platform to share their content with the whole world.

What is more, many of the interviewees have expressed in various ways that UGC creates familiarity with these brands. Specifically, Philip mentions that brands feel more "reachable" and "cozy" while Kevin acknowledges that to him brands generate a welcoming feeling because they post content made by users. Besides, this familiarity with the brands is linked with the fact that many participants are regarding Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK as more "informal" meaning that they are not perceived as strict corporations. This is best illustrated by Philip:

> It makes me feel closer. It breaks this, um, it breaks this idea [...] of the cold company that only cares about money, and only cares how to- to gain from you. (Philip, 29)

Last but not least, Anna and Anastasia, both avid Instagram users, are regarding UGC as more personal than branded content. This feeling seems to generate a sense of closeness and a bond between the participants and the brands.

This finding shows that participants are feeling familiar with the brands through the UGC they post. This sense boosts the feeling of intimate connection with the brand identity, which connects with the positive perception of the brand image of Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK

4.4.4. Mainstream brands

Despite having mentioned all of the above, that participants perceive brands as trustworthy, engaging, interactive and that they feel a sense of familiarity due to UGC, few of them have identified travel cybermediaries as mainstream. This minority of interviewees seems to feel an intimate connection to one or two of the travel cybermediaries, but they feel that some of them are more uniformed that others.

For starters, in many cases, the participants target Airbnb and express that they regard this brand as mainstream as far as its Instagram presence is concerned. This opinion contradicts with the majority of the literature, presenting Airbnb as an excellent example of disruptive innovation, that offers interesting and innovative

alternatives of accommodation (Guttentag, 2015). One would consider that, since Airbnb offers innovative peer-to-peer services and follows the latest trends in branding by reposting UGC, the brand would be perceived as more unique and original. Nevertheless, Kevin (28 years old) feels that Airbnb is more "distant" than Couchsurfing and KAYAK, while he feels that its posts are more "streamlined". To illustrate his point, he adds:

> Airbnb maybe tries to little more forcefully implement user generated content to make it seem more friendly. (Kevin, 28)

Kevin also refers to the fact that Airbnb promotes exclusively its services and accommodation option. On this matter, an interviewee, Philip, a 29-year old spontaneous traveler, observed that the UGC of Airbnb is more marketing-oriented compared to how it is used by other platforms:

> I think that they choose, so, the way Airbnb uses UGC, I feel like it is more, like, marketing oriented (Philip. 29).

As the brand posts mainly about its products, Jan feels that Airbnb has become more "commercial" and that it starts to lose its competitive advantage. Hence, this perceived distance from users as well as the more product-focused content creates a sense that Airbnb is a brand like any other brand. Still, the mainstream aspect of Airbnb correlates with the fact that, in the eyes of the interviewees, the brand has grown and gained great popularity over the years, at a point that now everyone knows about the brand. According to Guttentag (2015) a new product or service that challenges established ways of doing business will initially have limited appeal, but could later experience explosive growth.

About KAYAK, interviewees had mixed feelings. Many of them considered that the content of KAYAK is not special and that it does not differentiate from the one that other generic travel-related accounts post. In particular, Anastasia even expressed the opinion that KAYAK mimics Airbnb. To her, posting UGC, is an integral part of how Airbnb expresses its brand identity:

> I'm not so crazy about Kayak. It's like, because it's, it's not very different from the eem, from everything else that you see. Okay. Yeah, the memes are nice. The fact that they post some pictures of actual users. But the fact that Airbnb mainly does this, it's also like an identity for the brand. (Anastasia, 25)

By the analysis of the in-depth interviews with young adults, the perception that Airbnb and KAYAK are mainstream emerged. This view represents only a minority of the interviewees and it is not their overall perception about travel cybermediaries. In other words, an interviewee that perceives Airbnb as mainstream, does not seem to create the same association for the two other brands. Nonetheless, this sub-theme provides valuable information for brand managers, which could help them avoid using UGC in ways that could damage an intimate connection with the users.

4.5. Summary of results

Having stated all of the aforementioned, it is of utmost importance to summarize the findings in order to proceed to the section of conclusions with a clear overview of the emerging categories.

To begin with, after analyzing the Instagram posts of Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK, in order to investigate how travel cybermediaries are expressing their brand identities through UGC, the brands' engaged orientation appeared as the first theme. This category demonstrates the orientation these brands have and communicate online. In particular, the majority of the data show that the travel cybermediaries are trying to associate their brand name with the idyllic aspect of travelling, the strong human connections and the local integration.

What is more, their dynamic features and expressions surfaced as central elements of the brand identities these brands are expressing via UGC. To elaborate to a great extent, travel cybermediaries are presented as brands that offer authentic travelling experiences, exclusive app features and accommodation options as well as practical travel recommendations, information, and tips. Some data illustrate that travel cybermediaries are including dynamic expressions in their posts in an effort to communicate their active and youthful personality and their intimate connection with user identity.

After conducting and analyzing the interviews, in order to explore how young adults perceive the brand images of travel cybermediaries, the data showed that a great number of the interviewees' brand associations relates to the experiential and functional benefits they had linked to the services of the brands. In this research, the deep human connection, the genuine and local experiences, as well as the travel inspiration are identified as the experiential benefits that young adults place on travel

cybermediaries. Besides, participants seem to regard travel cybermediaries as providers of convenient, flexible, and cost reducing services. Last but not least, many interviewees acknowledged the "surprise" factor of these brands which might be perceived either as a concerning or as an exciting element of the brand image of Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK.

Furthermore, feeling an intimate connection with the brand identities of travel cybermediaries derived as core theme of the interviews as well. To explain, participants identify these brands as trustworthy, engaging, interactive, and they are experiencing a sense of familiarity. These perceived elements of the brand image create a feeling of intimate connection to the brand identity. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that few of the interviews regard these brands as mainstream, which might lead to distance between them.

5. CONCLUSIONS

With the emergence of social media, the communication patterns between consumers and the brands have changed, resulting in the transformation of the branding landscape. Brand management has become an open source activity, with consumers having a say in the matters of the brand (Fournier & Avery, 2011). As analyzed in the theoretical framework, through UGC, consumers are able to participate in the co-creation of the brand value and to influence brand activities by offering, among others, creative advertising material and feedback to companies (Burmann, 2010; Kaul & Chaudhri, 2017; Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011). Especially, in the travel, hospitality, and tourism sector, UGC is central as it has started to be used broadly by traditional travel-related suppliers, to engage their audiences and to receive strategic information. In this new digital environment, travel cybermediaries have developed, connecting suppliers with travelers through online platforms and creating vivid online communities. Many of these companies were found to be leveraging UGC on their social media. Nevertheless, after the thorough investigation of the literature, the relation of the branding processes of the growing travel cybermediaries with UGC was found to be understudied.

Therefore, within this current study, the purpose was to fill this gap in literature and further explore how UGC is part of the branding processes of travel cybermediaries as well as how it is perceived by young adults. In order to have a complete and rounded insight on the topic, the posed research question was investigated by two different perspectives, from the travel cybermediaries' and from the young adults' angle. In particular, the first sub-question that was formulated was based on the ways in which travel cybermediaries express their brand identities through UGC, and mostly on Instagram. Additionally, the second sub-question required the examination of the subject from the perspective of young adults in order to gain insights on their perception of the brand images of such companies. This way it was made possible to have a 360 view of the subject, both from the side of the companies that focus their branding efforts on UGC, as well as from the receiving end of those actions, the users themselves. The focus was on three specific cases, Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK, as all three of them actively encourage their audiences to create content and they are reposting it on a daily basis on their Instagram feeds. After

examining their Instagram posts and conducting interviews with young adults that use and follow these particular brands, the following findings surfaced.

First and foremost, by scrutinizing the Instagram posts of Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK, the brands' engaged orientation, along with its dynamic features and expressions appeared as themes providing an answer to the first sub-question of the study. The engaged orientation entails the general inclination these brands have and, mainly communicate with their audiences through UGC. Even though engaged orientation has not been mentioned in theory as an element of brand identity, the concept is related to the core values and culture of the brands and shows what travel cybermediaries are standing for (Urde, 2013). The second core category, the dynamic features and expression of brands, connects with the notion of "competences", which is considered a component of brand identity in the corporate brand identity matrix (Urde, 2013). Travel cybermediaries are communicating their special features and personality through dynamic expressions.

The interviews revealed that the participants are recognizing most aspects of the above two key elements of the brand identity travel cybermediaries convey through UGC. In many cases, their perceptions of brand images are reflecting the expressions of the brand identities of Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK. In particular, participants seem to interpret the brand image by attaching experiential and functional benefits and by feeling an intimate relationship to these brands. As mentioned previously, perceptions of brand image include the brand value that consumers place on a brand (Yuan, Liu, Luo, & Yen, 2016). Benefits are the consumers' perceptions of what a certain product or service can do for them (Keller, 1993). Furthermore, the intimate relationship to the brand is an overall attitude and evaluation of the brand image, which also affects consumer behavior (Keller, 1993)

The idyllic aspect of travelling that Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK are trying to promote through idealized user-created posts in order to reflect the orientation of their brand identity appeared to produce travel inspiration to the participants. Prior research has shown that, generally, leisure travelers browse UGC to get ideas for attractions, vacation activities and hotels (eMarketer, 2013). Moreover, the practical travel recommendations, information and tips that the brands share with their audiences represent some of the dynamic features of travel cybermediaries which result in interviewees regarding them as sources of information UGC is considered amongst the most important sources of information for travelers when

making a purchasing decision (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Mackay & Vogt, 2012). The participants, by perceiving these brands as inspirational and informative, add an experiential benefit to them and therefore they are inclined positively to travel cybermediaries.

In addition, travel cybermediaries appeared to present their brand identity by expressing their orientation for strong human connections through UGC that displays friendships and branded captions describing stories of people connecting. Participants seemed to attach the experiential benefit of deep human connections to Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK, both from their previous experiences with the brands but also through the UGC that they see on the Instagram accounts of the brands. Another inclination of the brands in their Instagram posts is the local integration. According to Yannopoulou et al. (2013) the foundation of the brand identities of Airbnb and Couchsurfing, as expressed through UGC, are the human and local factor. In this study, these two aspects of the orientation that travel cybermediaries convey on Instagram connect with one of the dynamic features they promote through UGC, which is the offering of authentic travelling experiences. As the data revealed, brands, by displaying the human connections and the local integration, highlight that their services create genuine experiences. Similarly, interviewees seem to regard these brands as providers of genuine and local experiences meaning that they, also, connect the idea of authenticity, firstly, with the local, and, secondly, with the human dimension. This is in accordance with literature as the interaction with hosts and the immersion to the local culture has been found to create authentic travelling experiences (Paulauskaite et al., 2017).

Furthermore, a dynamic feature that Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK promote through UGC and their branded captions is the fact that they provide exclusive app features, services, and accommodation options. Nevertheless, the vast portion of participants do not seem to recognize exclusivity, with the meaning of luxury, in the services of Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK. Instead the dimension of exclusivity that is related to the uniqueness of the travelling experiences that these companies provide, is recognized by the respondents. Additionally, they appear to link the functional benefit of convenient, flexible and cost-effective services. Interviewees seem to associate these brands with the assets that disruptive innovations introduce, which generally are focused on being cheaper, simpler, smaller or more convenient (Guttentag et al., 2017). However, the dimension of exclusivity that is

related to the uniqueness of the travelling experiences that these companies provide, is recognized by the respondents.

What is more, it has been also derived from the data that travel cybermediaries are promoting their active and youthful personality, through the way they express their brand identity via UGC and the branded captions. In this research, the findings were based on the dynamic expressions of the three companies, and they show the human characteristics that the brands are trying to promote in order to express their brand identity. Aaker (1996b) notes that the brand may be viewed as a person that is competent, trustworthy, active, or youthful. Interviewees seem to acknowledge this aspect as they regard travel cybermediaries as engaging and interactive through the UGC that they post. It should be pointed out that participants seem to view the fact that travel cybermediaries are posting UGC as an engaging method itself apart from the fun captions, the visually pleasing images, and the efforts for interaction from the companies.

In addition, travel cybermediaries are trying to promote their intimate connection to the consumer identity which is accomplished through their dynamic expressions in order to reflect their brand identities. To Urde (2013), relationships, and how they are built over time, reflect and define a corporate brand identity. By analyzing the interviews, the intimate connection that participants feel to the brand identity emerged as a core category, meaning that the many interviewees feel a sense of closeness to the brands due to the UGC they post and the ways they express their brand identities through it. In particular, data show that brands through UGC are perceived as trustworthy, more engaging and interactive and they feel a sense of familiarity. By scrutinizing the Instagram posts, it became apparent that by curating user endorsements, addressing directly their audience, and promoting online participation they tried to generate emotions of trust, familiarity and belongingg to their online Instagram community.

In general, young adults seem to perceive the brand images in the same way as travel cybermediaries are conveying their brand identity through UGC. Nevertheless, except for the perceptions of brand images that were respective to the expressions of the brand identities by the travel cybermediaries, and one could say that they were the desirable ones, there were some unexpected findings. Particularly, limited amount of the participants has classified the "surprise" factor as an integral element of travel cybermediaries, which was identified both as an experiential asset of these brands

compared to their traditional competitors but also as a reason for insecurity. In addition, even though the majority of participants feels an intimate tie to the brands, the perception that they are mainstream emerged. This view represents only a minority of the interviewees and it is not their overall perception about travel cybermediaries. However, both of the aforementioned provide a more complete overview of the young adults' perceptions of brand images.

After having stated all of the above, the current research seems to provide an answer for the main research question and sheds light on the ways in which UGC is part of the branding processes of travel cybermediaries and the ways it is perceived by young adults. Overall, UGC seems to provide a valuable tool with which travel cybermediaries can express their brand identities, by presenting their engaged orientation and dynamic features and expressions. Additionally, these expressions of the brand identities through UGC can create the desirable perceptions of the brand image to young adults, who appear to bind experiential and functional benefits to the brands and feel an intimate connection.

Nonetheless, the current study must not be regarded as a panacea for any misuse of UGC in the branding processes of travel cybermediaries. Therefore, these findings should always be critically processed before they are considered for a future study. The inclusion of UGC as a medium to express brand identities is at its dawn, and there is a need for further research on the field, in order to further explore its dynamics and its audiences' perceptions. The limitations of this study will be discussed more extensively in the following sub-section, along with the recommendations for future research.

5.1 Limitations and future research

There are a few limitations linked to this research, mainly associated to the way the content analysis was implemented and how the interviews were conducted. First of all, the fact that the three companies are not providing the exact same services might have led to few sub-categories that might not apply to all three brands. As mentioned in previous sections, Airbnb and Couchsurfing provide peer-to-peer services while KAYAK is a metasearch website that connects suppliers and more traditional accommodation options with travelers.

Regarding the second research method, the initial plan was to conduct the interviews entirely face-to-face. However, four of the interviews were conducted through Skype, and particularly, one of them with requested to have the webcam off. This could result in the loss of potentially insightful visual and nonverbal information, such as face expressions and hand movements, which could further add to the findings of the research.

Additionally, another limitation concerns the selection of the participants, as it was based on their previous experience with at least one of the three specific travel cybermediaries, Airbnb, Couchsurfing and KAYAK. However, most of the interviewees, as exhibited in Table 1, in the 'Methods' section, had experience with only two of the companies and most participants followed two out of the three Instagram accounts. It is possible that the lack of experience with the remaining booking platform might have influenced their perceptions on the brand images, as they did not have the relevant experience with all of them in order to proceed to a complete comparison. The interviewees should also have been between 25 to 34 years old. Nonetheless, no interviewee was older than 30 years-old. Therefore, this research could not provide sufficient results to make reliable conclusions about the perceptions of brand images by consumers older than 30-years-old.

Apart from the above, there are numerous directions for future research, as this current study shed some light on existing gaps that need further exploration. To begin with, since a part of this study was focused on how travel cybermediaries are expressing their brand identities through UGC based on analyzed Instagram posts, it would be interesting to explore the issue from the other side. More specifically, interviews with executives and branding experts from Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and KAYAK would be valuable in order to compare the intentions from the side of the brands, regarding their brand identity and the utilization of UGC in social media for branding purposes, with the findings of the current research that reveal the way these are perceived by the receiving end of young adults.

Since the focus of this study was on the travel cybermediaries, another suggestion would be to investigate the role of UGC in the branding processes of other travel-related brands, such as Expedia or TripAdvisor, that also leverage UGC, or even replicate the study, focusing on a different industry than the one of travel, hospitality, and tourism. Lastly, a future study could aim its attention to the national accounts of Airbnb and Couchsurfing and focus on investigating the perceptions

within specific countries, as well as the way the brands are adapting their content based on cultural and geographical-geopolitical differences.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide

Topics	Questions

Factual and demographic questions	1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
	    • Name, age, job or school
	    • Social media activities and platforms

Travel behavior	2. Can you describe me your travelling habits?
	    • Probe how often, where, accommodations, transport
	3. Can you describe me the last trip that you went?
	    • Location, length, services
	4. How do you make decisions for your trip?
	    • Accomodation and transport booking, reviews

Travel cybermediaries	5. What do you think about services like Airbnb/Couchsurfing/KAYAK?
	    • Are you aware of the different services that they provide?
	    • How do you know about the brand?
	    • What are its advantages over others?
	    • What concerns or problems might there be with these services?
	6. How do you feel about these companies and their relationship as mediators between owners (home owners or hotels) and travelers?
	    • Is the service of the platforms helpful or not?
	7. What stories from your own experience have you had with Airbnb/Couchsurfing/KAYAK?
	    • The responsibility of the company for these experiences

Instagram activity	8. How would you describe your Instagram activity?
	    • Active user? Time online? Following and responding to different accounts? Types of accounts?
	    • How are you interacting with travel-related accounts and what are these?
	    • Specific focus on "cybermediaries"
	    • Like, comment, ignore, click-through, purchase etc.
	    • Inspiration to interact actively with posts ex. caption, image, comments
	9. How do these posts/UGC make you think of Airbnb/Couchsurfing/ KAYAK?
	    • Opinion on the brands

Cooling down questions	10. After we have discussed all this, is there anything you would like to ask/add?

Appendix B: The coding tree on the expressions of brand identity of travel cybermediaries through UGC

Selective Codes	Axial Codes	Examples of Open Codes
Brand's engaged orientations	Idyllic aspect of travelling	Beautiful views, Nature, Creating mental travel-related images
	Strong human connection	International friendship, New friends, Sense of community
	Local integration	Local cuisine, Local culture, Local traditions
Dynamic features and expressions	Authentic travel experiences	Travelers' experiences, Genuine emotions, Home cooked food
	Exclusive app features, services, and accommodation options	Luxurious apartment, House background story, Brand's exclusive app features
	Practical travel recommendations, information, and tips	Sightseeing information, Exploration tips, Travel recommendations
	Active and youthful personality	Humorous captions, Current Affairs, Playful language
	Intimate connection with consumer identity	Close to the users' needs, Curated user endorsements, Addressing the users

Appendix C: The coding tree on the young adults' perceptions of the brand images of travel cybermediaries

Selective Codes	Axial Codes	Examples of Open Codes
Attaching experiential and functional benefits	Deep human connection	Human aspect, Human connection, Making new friends
	Genuine and local experiences	Experiencing the local, Feels like home, The local factor as an advantage
	Travel inspiration and information	Airbnb IG as travel inspiration, Place-focused UGC, Promoting the experience of travelling
	Convenient, flexible and cost reducing services	Fast services, Value-for-money accommodation, Helpful categorization in Airbnb website
	The "surprise" factor	The unknown factor of Couchsurfing, Safety as a concern, Fake information online
Feeling an intimate connection	Trustworthy brands through UGC	UGC creates trust, Not an advertisement, UGC is more reliable
	Engaging and interactive brands through UGC	Interaction on the IG of KAYAK, UGC as a motivation to participate
	Familiarity with the brands	Caring brand, Informal atmosphere, UGC is more personal
	Mainstream brands	Airbnb feels distant, Marketing oriented content, Same as other platforms