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Art hotels and value co-creation: the dynamics of the
customers' interaction
A case study from Tuscany

Master's Thesis 30 credits

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SMMM20
Spring, 2019

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Abstract

In tourism, hotel customers and hotel settings are changing and evolving their nature: new dynamics and new contexts create and co-create new value. Hotels integrate new elements in their offer to recreate innovative physical environments and increase the customer experience. As a result, new and specific hotel genres are now operating on the market and each one is characterized by a different and specific asset of social dynamics.

The present research set out to investigate how art hotels integrate the pieces of art in their offer, in their services, and in their settings. The study aims also to discuss how customers relate to these new environmental components. Two main theories are employed: the servicescape theory and the value co-creation one. At the same time, the social dynamics have been interpreted through Goffman's models. The opportunity to combine the theoretical frameworks with a tool of analysis such as the theatrical metaphor allowed to better discuss and investigate the phenomenon.

The results suggested the importance of an art hotel more as a social setting rather than as a mere physical environment where socially given conceptions need to be clarified to all the participants. The opportunity to properly contextualize the value co-creation emerged as an important aspect to discuss how customers perceive the artworks and their value co-creation element.

Key words: *Value co-creation, Hotel experience, Art hotels, lobbies, Servicescape, Goffman*

Acknowledgment

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those people that have been so important to the completion of this thesis: without their help and support it would have not been possible.

First of all, I would like to thank Erika, my supervisor. From the very beginning, she supported and guided me. In spite of the time pressure and the distance, she pushed me toward the goal and offered me so many interesting insights.

I would like also to thank Marzia: she made this project possible, she believed in me and in my research!

Then, a huge thanks to all my Swedish and Home friends, from far and near you have been an important part my master experience and you have made it much better than any expectation. Thank you for listening and supporting me!

A heartfelt thanks to Federica, my friend and my colleague, my partner in crime and in the research, the other half of an apple that, even if it would never match, makes me happy every day!

A special thanks to Florecetown and especially to Edo, the most comprehensive and stimulating manager ever. Thank you for having me in your amazing team since 2012, thank you for keeping me with you but moreover thank you for letting me go whenever I needed to. Ready to start again!

*Last but not least a lovely thanks to my amazing family, in special to my *mamy e daddy*. Thank you for the believing in me, for supporting me and for making my life so full of love. A very last and special thanks to my sister and my brother: my personal and daily motivation.*

Vi voglio bene.

1. Introduction

Although this is not always straightforward to describe, the current economy can be seen as a service one. Services represent a heterogeneous “group of economic activities not directly associated with the manufacture of goods, mining or agriculture” (OECD, 2000, p. 7), rather than with businesses and financial operations, customer care and tourism, logistics and e-commerce offered on a global scale (Gallouj, Weber, Stare, & Rubalcaba, 2015). Generally speaking, services are characterized by a strong human value addition (OECD, 2000), and regardless of their differences, service organizations share a common and strong intangible dimension (Bravo, Martinez, & Pina, 2017; Brotherton, 1999). The intangibility or “the lack of physical attributes” (Bebko, 2000, p. 9) comprises and challenges the measurement of a service itself: customers experience great difficulties in evaluating a service (Featherman & Wells, 2004). To mitigate the consequences of the intangibility, services producers and delivers provide their customers with “one or several proxies that can be utilized to evaluated services before they are actually experienced” (Pizam, 2015, p. 151). Found that the physical evidence of a service can implement and improve the communication of the service itself, service organizations aim to “tangibilize the intangibles”, in other words, to shift customers’ attention from the intangible dimension to the tangible one implementing a sort of service-packing (OECD, 2000; Pizam, 2015). Since services cannot be packed as products, service-packing occurs in terms of “exterior and interior of the buildings, landscape, lighting, decors, furniture, artwork, staff, uniforms etc” (Pizam, 2015, p. 151). This approach especially concerns the healthcare and hospitality sector (Pizam, 2015).

With more than 1,320 million international arrivals and global revenue of 1,340 billion of American dollars, in 2017 tourism experienced its highest growth since 2010. At the same time, tourism is not a simple an economic driver, rather than a wide and cross-disciplinary reality where different issues meet (UNWTO, 2018). Within a so broad and interdisciplinary field, different theories and models can be analyzed and combined together. Besides the more general considerations concerning the importance of the tangibilization in the hospitality industry, the physical component is extremely important in the hotel one. In the lodging context, the environmental component does not simply represent the service-packing, rather than it affects a customer’s hotel-experience in defining the first impression before the guest’s interaction with the service employees and actual service (Lin I. Y., 2004; Hussein, Hapsari, & Yulianti, 2018). However, hotels are not just their settings, rather than a sum of services that act as a background for social and physical relations that co-create value (Heinonen, Temporal and

spatial e-service value, 2006; Walls, 2014). Indeed, within the hotel industry, any experience is not simply provided by the supplier, rather than it is co-built by all the engaged actors: each participant adds its own final component of the value chain. Guests are no longer simply consumers or buyers, they are co-producers and co-creators of the value. (Heinonen, 2006) Furthermore, the nature of the actors taking part in the hospitality industry is growing and changing according to the technological developments: internal and external customers, financial investors and stakeholders from the political arena or the society meet on the same context. All of them are essential in delivering a service and in managing resources as well as creating value. (Pantelidis, 2014)

Besides the strong social dimension, in the hospitality industry, the physical component represents an important competitive element (Wilkins, 2010). Independent hotels and *hotellerie* chains innovate their offers through new and well-defined settings where suppliers and customers are invited to actively contribute to the hotel experience. Despite the academic and business importance of this aspect of the hospitality industry, the studies about are still scarce and the impacts of these new strategies on the hotels' performances have not researched yet (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkçioğlu, 2015; de la Pena, Núñez-Serrano, Jaime, & Francisco, 2016). In innovating a hotel experience, the use of local art, cultural heritage, and unique environment increases a hotels' business and enhances the customer satisfaction and the value perception (Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018).

1.1 Aim and scope of the study

The present research combines a personal interest for the spatial dimension of services and the human environmental behavior with the current scarcity of research concerning the art as cornerstone of a hotel's business strategy (Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018). The desire to analyze how guests as co-creators interact within a socially given but physically hybrid environment brought together different disciplines, theories, and models. The present paper aims to analyze the interactive dimension of a specific facet of the hospitality: the communication and value co-creation that customers perceive from the artistic dimension of a hotel's lobby.

Therefore, the core of the paper is to research the value of the physical component of a specific hotel genre: the art hotel.

The co-existence of two different businesses – hotels and art galleries – within the same physical context is still an unexplored branch of the hospitality industry (Wang, Tang, & Cheng,

2018). In a similar context, the customer experience is a combination of hotel services and cultural and mental enrichment (Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018).

Although previous studies about hotel lobbies have been conducted (Hussein, Hapsari, & Yulianti, 2018), the current state of knowledge could be implemented. Further interdisciplinary approaches could help in defining the importance of the lobbies as one of the most significant functional area (Ali & Rosmini, 2013).

The opportunity to investigate this aspect of the hospitality industry could improve the business performances of the hotels. The current lack among “industry practitioners and researchers... [of] an instrument to evaluate guest assessments of a hotel’s design quality” (Zemke, Chen, Raab, & Zhong, 2017, p. 338) affects the opportunity to properly innovate and co-create (Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018). Similarly, this research could facilitate a complete understanding of a customer’s experience and it is an extremely important element of the hospitality industry due to its high experience-intensity (Cetin & Walls, 2016). As a further consideration, it could lead to the identification of new social and cultural patterns between hotels’ employees and guests improving the cross-cultural interactions (Bensch, 2016).

According to the literature review mentioned in this paper, a research gap has been identified while trying to interpret the importance of art in hotels through the lens of the value co-creation theory. Previous research aimed to verify the value of art in hotels in terms of perceived value, (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkçioğlu, 2015; de la Pena, Núñez-Serrano, Jaime, & Francisco, 2016; Hussein, Hapsari, & Yulianti, 2018).

When customers take part in a value co-creation process, their perception of the value advanced by a service provider change (Heinonen, 2006), a study concerns how it changed and how value proposition and perception affect each other was thought important to improve an innovative service delivery within the hospitality industry. A further and cross-disciplinary evaluation of the environmental element of the hotel industry was thought relevant for the discipline.

The identification of the above research gap in this specific branch of the hospitality was possible also because of a wider analysis of the service industry in terms servicescape theory and spatial design (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkçioğlu, 2015).

Value co-creation is positively related to customer satisfaction, trust, employee satisfaction, sales performance and organizational innovation (Ma, Gu, Wang, & Hampson, 2017).

1.2 Research question

As a result, the overall question “How does art contribute to create value in a hotel experience?” was formulated. At the same time, to better structure the research more operationalized three sub-questions have been defined:

- “How do hotels use artistic works to present and realize their value proposition?”;
- “How do customers relate to the pieces of art in hotels?”;
- “What kind of value do the customers co-create with the exposed pieces of art?”

The core of the present research concerns the spatial and artistic dimension of the lobby itself and since the guests’ interaction occurs more with physical environments than with the staff (Lin I. Y., 2004) the human dimension of the front-desk will be not part of the study. At the same time, the present research focuses on customer and not on the employees because of the gap between customers’ and managers’ perceptions (Cetin & Walls, 2016).

2. Literature review

In this second section, the author introduces and analyzes the current state of knowledge of the central topic of the present work. Considering the hospitality industry through the lens of the value co-creation theory as the main topic of the research, the first subsection is dedicated to the concept of value co-creation. A general background on the hospitality is introduced. Then, the focus is narrow it down to hotels as one of the main businesses of the hospitality industry. Once introduced hotels as economic and social actors, each aspect is more deeply and specifically analyzed. A final subchapter is dedicated to the tool of analysis of the present research: the theatrical metaphor of Goffman used to interpret the social dimension of the hotel context.

The analysis of the previous theoretical and methodological contributions established potential gaps in the research and defined the present research questions (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

To create the present literature review different keywords and multiple combinations of the them were used to research and catalogue the available material. The material was researched on online databases as well as in physical libraries. Besides academic papers and sectorial journals, several theoretical books were used to develop and create solid bases to build methods and to define each step of the research.

2.1 The concept of value co-creation

The consumption of a service or of a product is associated with the concept of value and according to the literature many different but similar definitions are possible. Initially, value was associated with a mere economic standpoint where the prices defined the quality. (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkçioğlu, 2015). Firms and companies designed products and services, defined marketing strategies, and controlled distribution channels with no or little interference from the customer side used to be on the market just at the end of any exchange (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Recently, a shift toward a cognitive customer-supplier interaction occurred and it reshaped the concept of value as well as the market dynamics (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkçioğlu, 2015). The customer value perception is now considered an important aspect that may directly or indirectly affect any social and economic exchange (Lexhagen, 2008). Value is now perceived as an experience, “a joint creation” where companies and customers engage themselves (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 8). Customers earned a more dominant position on the market and now they play an active role within each interaction on the market (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Consequently, customers represent an integral part of most industries, especially of the service one. Services providers aim to innovate and improve the customer experience engaging the customers. (Ma, Gu, Wang, & Hampson, 2017) However, the quality of the experience is based and affected by the nature of the customer’s engagement (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Nowadays, due to the new tools in terms of information, connection, and empowerment customers can constantly learn and improve their resources to establish a bi-directional dialogue: customers can influence and interact with suppliers in every part of a business exchange. The new interactive dimension of the services needs to take place within a context where there are clear rules, quite fair information about accessibility and transparency, and a risk-benefit attitude. (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) This new value asset is thought possible because of the active participation of customers in a business’s activities. As a result, companies do not offer a real value to their customers rather than a proposal of value that it can be completed through their own engagement in the value perception. (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkçioğlu, 2015; Ma, Gu, Wang, & Hampson, 2017)

The concept of value co-creation is taken over the service-dominant logic (SD-Logic). Part of the current management literature, from the early 2000s the SD-Logic and its developments – Customer Dominant Logic (CD-Logic) – aim to reshape the concept of services: from a market

category to a value creation process (Grönroos, 2008). Customers are no longer interested in what they are buying rather than in the value that they can create with the combination of new and old resources (Ma, Gu, Wang, & Hampson, 2017). From the companies' perspective, customers are acting different roles and become "temporary members or partial employees of the firm" (Bettencourt, 1997, p. 384).

The participation of the customers at the value co-creation process still requires a holistic understanding of the customer itself: it facilitates any interaction and to improve services and products. The focus has to be on the customer in terms of real needs rather than on the products' or services' features (Heinonen, et al., 2010). The understanding of the "basic components" is necessary to accomplish a value co-creation and to determine a positive experience (Cetin & Walls, 2016, p. 396).

2.2 Background on hospitality

As stated in the introduction, the concept of hospitality is not easy to define and a multi-disciplinary debate about a clear definition of the phenomenon is still going on. Even if it is still difficult to answer the question "What is hospitality?", it is important to underline that in spite of the current heterogeneity of the industry, hospitality organizations share a common historical heritage: the production- and value-chain of the activities related to the provision of "shelter, food, or both to people away from their homes" (Barrows, Powers, & Reynolds, 2012, p. 4). Another important consideration is about the already occurred shift from the domestic dimension of hospitality to the commercial one. The concept is related to human interactions in order to research mutual benefits within a "harmonious" context. (Brotherton, 1999)

Nowadays hospitality is different from the traditional one, it is a more complex system where the paid dimension of any exchange affects each interaction and requires higher performances (Bengsch, 2016). The "exchange of money for goods" (Bengsch, 2016, p. 34) defines a new kind of "consumer" and the previous familiar dimension of the hospitality fades and makes way for the new one (George M. Blue, Minah Harun, 2003). Currently, also customers and guests changed and evolved their nature, they became more sophisticated defining specific customer clusters and suggesting the creation of new trends. The research of a specific alignment between customers and businesses aims to reach goals in terms of factors such as location and size. (Thapa, 2007)

2.3 Hotel as a business

The difficulty to define the hospitality industry is strictly linked to the complex nature of the institutions that operate into the field: different and complementary businesses operate and provide services, products, and contexts to build relationships and exchanges.

As anticipated, the present research focuses on hotels, here a short overview of this specific service.

In spite of differences in sizes and typologies, hotels share some basic functions and functional areas but the most important in terms of organizational issues and profit is the room-rental one. The size of each structure usually influences how services and functions are managed. (Barrows, Powers, & Reynolds, 2012) Hotels can be categorized according to different criteria such as function, price, and market segment. A classification according to the price allows the identification of hotel categories. (Barrows, Powers, & Reynolds, 2012) Among the different categories, the present research investigates the of luxury hotels. Generally speaking, luxury hotels provide several services and operations further than the room rental such as high-quality food and beverage, recreational facilities, and “a high ratio of employees to guest rooms” (Barrows, Powers, & Reynolds, 2012, p. 279). Besides the wide variety of services provided by luxury hotels, these accommodations are characterized by unique equipment and furniture creating upscale environments (Barrows, Powers, & Reynolds, 2012).

The complex social and economic nature of the hotels creates the right circumstances for customers’ engagement and stimulates the hotels in creating “new services *with* their customers rather than *for* their customers” (Ma, Gu, Wang, & Hampson, 2017, p. 3024)

2.4 Hotel as a servicescape

Despite being a service, hotels do have also an important physical component (Lin, 2004) and can be considered a “lens” of modern society (Bell, 2012): they bring together within the same context actors with different backgrounds and contribute to creating a sort of “communicative bubble” (Bensch, 2016, p. 18). Nevertheless, the research of a mutual benefit defines a clear social construction (Bensch, 2016).

Generally speaking intangible elements can be evaluated after the service consumption within the overall experience; on the contrary, tangible elements can affect from the beginning a service experience and contribute to the general evaluation creating an image in the customers’ minds (Lin, 2004). Especially in case of services, the environment is the primary component to

be judged and it is important to the customer experience (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkçioğlu, 2015).

The importance of the physical dimension of the service industry was theorized in the 90s when Bitner (1992) coined the term “servicescape” to describe “the man-made” (p.58) environment. The servicescape expression refers to several elements of a setting from the overall layout to furniture and décor (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkçioğlu, 2015). The Bitner’s contribution is thought to be extremely important to measure a high subjective and “esoteric” element (Zemke, Raab, & Wu, 2018, p. 920). The overall impact of the physical environment on humans has been studied and researched in relation to many services: shopping centers, dry cleaners or fast-food restaurants, and each one is featured by specific elements. The effective impact of the physical component has to be referred to its own context where different elements are substantive and specific. (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkçioğlu, 2015)

Regarding the present research, it is important to underline that hotels are designed and built not just to deliver a service rather than as long-term businesses: their attractiveness and functionality need to be combined with an overtime investors’ favor (Barrows, Powers, & Reynolds, 2012). A physical environment is important in defining not just a customer’s experience rather than also a customer’s behavior. The same definition of behavior requires the presence of the other people to act with, things to do and environment to interact with. As per Bitner (1992), the human response to a given environment can be cognitive, emotional, and physiological. Thus, besides the creation of an organization’s image, the physical dimension of a service can facilitate the social and cultural interactions and the quality of a service delivery. (Thapa, 2007)

From a business point of view, an appropriate spatial design based on a combination of environmental aesthetics and functionality can positively impact on the customers’ perception increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty especially when it comes to reserve the same hotel in future (Thapa, 2007; Dedeoğlu et al., 2015). Businesses should research for an alignment between the “desirable behavior of their customers” (p. 1) and the physical support to reach these goals (Thapa, 2007). At the same time, it is important to underline how no environment can be comfortable to everyone and it is because of the individual component in responding to external stimuli (Thapa, 2007). Since the 80s, the physical component of any service provider is also used as a marketing tool (Fidzani, 2002) and nowadays it is an important element also to define and implement a differentiation strategy (Cetin & Walls, 2016). Hence, hotels concretize their offer also through aesthetic and design and once defined their own style and identity (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012).

The physical component of hotels and lobbies is largely studied and during the last decades, the combination of welcoming and circulating dimension drove toward larger and more spacious areas to reshape the environment and to facilitate customers' experience creation (CETIN & WALLS, 2016; Thapa, 2007). Today hotels are trying to diversify themselves more and more and one of the most difficult challenges is to combine the functionality of the lobby area with the aesthetic, accessibility, and facilitates in order to give acknowledgment each space and task (Thapa, 2007). Hotel lobbies are thought to have the single greatest impact on guests and visitors (Thapa, 2007) and can contribute to the overall impression of a service delivery; thus, generally speaking lobbies are total designed environments.

The lobby environment has been studied under different perspectives and the hospitality dimension has been combined with different other models and theories. The social dimension of the hospitality related to the hotels is an important object of academic research. Individuals' perceptions of a hotel lobby tend to include not only the front desk, but also many other elements such as the employees and customers, the lighting, floors, furniture, artwork, and color of the walls. (Lin I. Y., 2004)

More approaches and models are possible due to the interdisciplinarity and heterogeneity of the subject. As per Bengsch (2016), tourism itself created a sort of expected behavior especially at any destination that can be analyzed through different disciplines. The hospitality-exchange has been researched also in terms of socio-linguistic process, as well as the customer satisfaction and customer first impression formation (Fidzani, 2002; Bluea & Harunb, 2003; Countryman and Jang, 2006). The social interaction takes place as verbal and nonverbal communication: both are affected by the physical framework as it defines the linguistic and interactive features (Bluea & Harunb, 2003). Generally speaking, the verbal exchange between hosts and guests is in compliance to already given behaviors and roles. Primary and secondary actors are engaged and usually more than two of them take part in the same communicative process. It occurs also because not just humans are actively involved rather than also elements, such as the physical frame participate. (Bluea & Harunb, 2003) Ethnographic insights and conversations analysis were conducted to study the interactive dimension of the customer-supplier interaction at a hotel front desk as a linguistic process (George M. Blue, Minah Harun, 2003). Findings suggested that conversations are highly structure following a sort of institutional script: "both host and guest conform to certain predictable behavior when addressing each other" (Bluea & Harunb, 2003, p. 76)

Another important analysis of the physical component has been conducted in terms of customers' first impression formation (Fidzani, 2002; Countryman and Jang, 2006). In a first

impression formation, three different factors are considered: ambient, design and social. The research conducted by Fidzani (2002) confirmed a great interest for the lighting system and the cleanliness, the style and the layout rather than the social dimension. Similarly the presence of plants, artworks, and mirrors was confirmed to facilitate a first positive impression. Besides the physical layout of the lobby another important element reported by the participants was the size of the lobby: larger lobbies were referred to influence the customers' impression. (Fidzani, 2002)

2.5 Hotels as an art gallery

As previously said hotels combine social and business dimensions and in developing any competitive advantage aim not simply to raise the economic return rather but also to increase customer satisfaction. It is thought possible when the applied strategies are based on an ambidextrous approach. (Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018) Ambidexterity refers to the ability to combine and balance exploration and exploitation strategies. Potentially conflicting logics, both argue and discuss on how to use resources to create long terms businesses. Exploitation aims to improve and increase the value of the current *status quo*. On the contrary, exploration concerns changes and innovations. In their business strategies, hotels are suggested to research a trade-off between exploitation and exploration in order to development new services but also to meet customers' needs. (Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018)

In this perspective, the definition of a specific hotel genre defines a clear exploration strategy that facilitates the identification of core values through which hotel can fit in travelers' interest. It can help in defining competitive advantages on the long term and at the same time in maintaining the current ones.

From the 1990s the environmental design is used as a valid element to identify and to build a self-conscious hotel identity. (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012) Given the positive impact of plants, artworks, and mirrors in a hotel lobby (Fidzani, 2002), more independent hoteliers and hotel chains are moving toward to an artistic ambiance especially (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012). Especially if related to local culture, works of art have been proved to develop and increase a hotel's competitive advantage (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012; Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018). In spite of the positive feedback collected among the successful cases, ordinary hotels struggle in defining their own idetity and as per many other innovative approaches, there is a high percentage of failure (Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018). The step-by-step process is still unclear and customers need to be provided not simply with artistic installations rather than with

an overall and excellent customer care (Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018). Art galleries in hotels are considering a successful implementation when locals and guests are equally engaged (Blank, 2005). Besides, to fully perform and communicate the art a multi-functional environment needs to be built up, the art needs to be integrated in the hotel itself (Bonansinga, 2016).

As per Blank (2005), the presence of local artists well represents a hotel and increase its business. Besides, the interaction in loco with exposed artworks makes a long term connection between the hotel and the customers. A clear hotel genre is also important to address specific services to the appropriate customer target: the presence of art selection recalls especially art collectors and amateurs. At the same time, being an art lover is not essential to be drawn to the art, if each piece of art is connected with hotel a natural connection would take place also between the guest and the art (Fox, 2017). The artistic orientation of a hotel can occur in different forms: artist-in-residence programs and demostations, in loco art galleries or virtual art galleries. (Blank, 2005) Different strategies that requires different approaches, but a general pattern can be recognized and it consists of the understanding of customers needs and art-oriented customer service. (Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018) A 24/7 art availability and a free of charge access represent an added value to the hotel offer that can operate a sort of decontextualization: it reshapes the meaning and the purpose of the art itself (Bonansinga, 2016). At the same time, within an art hotel is important to consider how art affects individuals: along to the expected reaction, many others are possible and usually occur as an emotional response (Carroll, 1986; Silvia, 2005). An emotional response depends on the artistic stimulus itself but also on the collective context and on the level of engagement (Silvia, 2005). Thus, the effective valorization of this added value is up to the hotel itself that should integrate it into its own value proposition.

2.6 Hotel as a value-cocreation

According to SD- and CD-Logic each value co-creation process takes shape in a social context where every actor is required to play a given role to develop new value (Cannas, Argiolas, & Cabiddu, 2019). Among many different factors that can stimulate a customer's reaction, the environment component has been proved to be important (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkçioğlu, 2015).

A combination of a totally designed physical component and a social framed system that go beyond the individual dimension as a hotel represents a good setting to implement a research

that aims to evaluate specific physical cues through the concept of value co-creation (Dedeoğlu, Küçükergin, & Balıkcıoğlu, 2015; Cannas, Argiolas, & Cabiddu, 2019). Besides, the hotel-customer interaction reports positive performances that, due to the complete of the market, improve the “value in relation to service delivery, service improvement, and service sustainability” (Ma, Gu, Wang, & Hampson, 2017, p. 3025)

The research of mutual benefit typical of a value co-creation process fits well in the currently paid dimension of the commercial hospitality recreating the appropriate circumstances for a concrete value co-creation (Bensch, 2016). Within the value co-creation asset and specifically in relation to the hospitality industry, hotels are considered a commercial space suitable for an identity building process full of resources where individuals and communities can co-create their own value. At the same time, people and objects are strictly related to a given temporal and spatial dimension of a hotel and their behavior is designed within an already predetermined value co-creation process. (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012) Specifically, lobbies represent a unique physical and social dimension where the first value impression is created and thus extremely important in terms of customer value (Thapa, 2007).

2.7 Hotel as a theater

Given the interactional dimension of the present research, the value co-creation framework is not enough to explain and interpret the contribution of the spatial dimension within a hotel-experience. To complete the theoretical background of this project, the *Impression Management* and *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* suggested by Erving Goffman were thought to be appropriate. Both try to explain the motivation behind the complexity of the human behavior and are also known as the theatrical metaphor (Dillard, Browning, Sitkin, & Sutcliffe, 2000). The wide applicability of those theories pushed scholars to adopt them also in other disciplines: corporate management, hotel industry, operating theatre, public relations and social movements (Whiteside & Kelly, 2015). Besides, Goffman’s theories were originally thought to explain the social life within physical confines but nowadays are often applied to study online communities (Sociological Perspectives on Stigmatized Online Communities., 2014). The core of Goffman’s theory concerns the social dimension of individuals that in their everyday life are requested to perform specific roles based on social expectations and obligations (Whiteside & Kelly, 2015). Each role is determined by three complementary elements: “the physical environment (‘setting’); the appearance and manner of the performer

(‘personal front’); and the collective, situational expectation (‘front’)” (Whiteside & Kelly, 2015, p. 16). The collective component of each interaction becomes an institutionalized behavioral pattern where everyone can recognize him- or herself within the same social context. This side of any performance is labeled “frontstage” and it occurs when performer and audience meet. On the contrary, when the performer is by her- or himself, the backstage side takes place and in this secondary region individuals can relax and “step out of [their] character” (Sociological Perspectives on Stigmatized Online Communities., 2014, p. 6). The presence of other people – as participants or as audience – is considered to be essential to perform a social exchange: the others constitute the social context where within given environments specific behavioral obligations are expected (Dillard, Browning, Sitkin, & Sutcliffe, 2000; Whiteside & Kelly, 2015). The ability to stick to a given script determines the success or the failure of an interaction. As per Dillard & at. (2000) the social dimension of the impression management can be interpreted “beyond the specific place and time of engagement” (p. 405). The dilation of time and space is extremely significant within the digital dimension of the contemporary social interaction. Due to its original limited access, internet was considered a sort of back-stage region, where individuals could share openly similar experiences and act without any social constraints. Now according to recent research, internet is defined as the front-stage region of our days: the virtual interactions are framed and regulated in a sort of reproduction of the face-to-face ones. As a result, the online communities are featured by a strong normative dimension and social expectations are imposed by the context. (Sociological Perspectives on Stigmatized Online Communities., 2014)

In this research, in conformity with the literature (Yang, Ryan, & Zhang, 2016), Goffman can be used to investigate many social phenomena and it fits well in tourist analysis. The tangible component of any touristic encounter is distinct from the everyday life one and the physical change in location requires also a change in the frame of reference: from the local dimension to the global one. The tangible component of an accommodation defines also the nature of each hotel as a safe place where special relationships take place, where two parties meet (Bengsch, 2016). If the general trend of services registers a more and more technological side at the expense of the human value occurs, a hotel-experience is still based on interpersonal and cross-cultural communication (Bluea & Harunb, 2003). Within each hotel, there are different servicescapes and many of them are public spaces, in spite of being part of a private organization; thus, different levels of privacy and interactions take place (Countryman & Jang, 2006). At the same time, any hotel experience is characterized by a temporary dimension

typical of travels and trips. It affects also the social dimension of the interactions: chronological scanned and spatially determined. (Bensch, 2016)

Due to the wide applicability of Goffman's theories, the present research aims to integrate the theater metaphor with the concept of value co-creation and would use as a tool of analysis.

3 Methodology

Before introducing and explaining the methods used in the present research, approach, strategy, and design are introduced. Within the last section, there is also a brief presentation of the sample selection and the case study.

3.1 Research approach

The present project was structured after a first phase dedicated to a preliminary material analysis. It was extremely useful to get more and complete insights about the topic and to define the research approach. Since the literature about the added value of artworks in hotel-experience is mainly based on case study, the first aim was to verify concepts and patterns collecting new empirical data (Bhattacharjee, 2012). A similar goal suggested a deductive approach. However, a deductive research is for its own nature complementary to an inductive one; thus, a constant interaction between theories and empirical data occurred. The opportunity to combine both approaches proved to be extremely significant and it offered the opportunity to deduce further theoretical concepts about the research subject from the collected data. (Bhattacharjee, 2012)

Within the present research, the deductive approach is implemented while moving from general patterns to a specific case study. Similarly, moving from specific considerations of the present research, a more general trend can be reported. (Babbie, 2011)

3.2 Research strategy

The research approach – a deductive one – as well as the aim of understanding a social phenomenon and a constructivism ontological position, defined the strategy of the present project as a qualitative research (Bryman, 2012). It is important to underline that the label qualitative or quantitative does not refer to data itself rather than to the use of the data that the researcher does. Generally speaking, a quantitative strategy is associated with a numerical

analysis of the collected material, while a qualitative one to a nonnumerical method of analysis. As a result, qualitative strategies can offer a richer and more detailed overall picture. (Babbie, 2011) Furthermore, the literature suggests a qualitative strategy as an appropriate approach to study the concept of “value” (Lexhagen, 2008). However, a qualitative research, due to its richness in meaning, determines ambiguous theories-data linkages; thus, theories and empirical data tend to be one the outcome of the other (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, a qualitative approach is thought more appropriated to study social and cultural sciences (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009).

Any qualitative research needs to comply with academic criteria specifically suggested to assess the quality of a study (Bryman, 2012). According to the literature, the nature of qualitative research can be tested in terms of trustworthiness and authenticity. The first one aims to verify the researcher’s approach in terms of good practice and clear context identification, procedures accessibility and good faith in the researcher’s objectivity. On the contrary, authenticity concerns political and social considerations in terms of the researcher’s conduct. Especially this last point is largely debated in the academia due to the sensitivity of some social subjects. (Bryman, 2012) The present research project is overall designed in compliance with the above-mentioned criteria; similarly, each research step complies with the same criteria.

3.3 Research design

While studying a social phenomenon a field research is suggested to be appropriate: it can provide the researcher with a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon itself. It is thought to be extremely useful when the subject of the research is strictly related to its own environment or context. In conducting a field research, it is important to limit the investigation not just to the societal phenomenon but also to a given physical or social context and to a period of time. The identification of those circumstances defines the boundaries of each case study. (Babbie, 2011) A case study is considered one of the most appropriate design to investigate a social phenomenon that cannot be separated from its context: events and actors, experiences and settings can be studied at the same time (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009).

Given the main topic of the present research: the human interaction and perception in a given physical context, a field research fitted well in the aim of the project. Furthermore, the data collected within a case study offer a “richer, more contextualized, and more authentic interpretation of the phenomenon of interest” (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 93). In more general

terms, a case study offers the opportunity to investigate the literature, to collect data and to verify previous theories (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

The process developed to select the case study considered two main criteria presented in the next section; then, a detailed presentation of the case study of the research.

3.3.1 Sample selection

The explorative nature of the research requested for a collaboration with a tourist accommodation. In sampling the possible partners, considering the nature of the research – a case study – a theoretical sampling was considered more appropriate than a statistical one. (Bhattacharjee, 2012) The selected sites fit the nature of the research according to two main criteria: hotel category and location.

Given the main interest of the present research on the perception of a specific hotel genre and on a specific element of the physical environment, a specific focus on a luxury accommodations category was considered as an important element (Wilkins, 2010). First class hotels aim to fulfill diversified customers' needs and within this price category, the best service quality is required (Bluea & Harunb, 2003; Wu & Liang, 2009). At the same time, the high prices paid by luxury hotels' customers facilitate studies and research concerning the service quality and the value's perception (Herstein, Gilboa, Gamliel, Bergera, & Ali, 2018). Besides, it is important to underline how the quality itself is not enough to deliver a high-quality service, a clear focus on customers' perceptions and needs is the decisive factor within a hotel strategy (Herstein, Gilboa, Gamliel, Bergera, & Ali, 2018). Analyzing and interpreting customers' understanding of luxury accommodations is important also to define the accommodation itself, as per Herstein et. al (2018) it is possible to label a hotel beyond the standard star-based criteria. How luxury and boutique hotels present themselves and "their uniqueness—for example, through customized design and decoration" (p. 143) is important to verify the success of the value co-creation process (Herstein, Gilboa, Gamliel, Bergera, & Ali, 2018).

The second criterium of the present research is a geographical one and it is given by the current positive growth of the touristic flows in Tuscany in the last years. The data collected in 2017 and processed in 2018 reported an overall growth. Combined official and unofficial accommodations, in 2017 national and international arrivals reached almost 100 millions of tourist-numbers within a +6,2% growth. Especially in relation to the super luxury segment the 2017 trend was extremely positive: +10,7%. (Conti, 2018)

3.3.2 The case study: Belmond Ltd. in Florence and in Casole

Taking into account the previous considerations, Castello di Casole and Villa San Michele are considered to fit the nature of the research. Castello di Casole and Villa San Michele are two of thirty-seven properties belong to Belmond Ltd. Characterized by a distinctive luxury-oriented portfolio, Belmond Ltd aims to combine the local identity of each location with the international identity of the brand.

After a preliminary contact with one the legal represent of the company, the present research was authorized. On this occasion, the research methods were presented, and the technical details defined.

Besides the above-mentioned reasons in terms of location and category, both accommodations are thought to comply with the criteria of the research because of their architectural and artistic peculiarities. Nowadays Villa San Michele and Castello di Casole are worldwide famous hotels, but both originally had different uses. The first one was a Franciscan monastery built in the XV century in Fiesole, part of the Orient-Express Hotels Ltd¹ since 1982. Castello di Casole, instead, was a medieval castle built in the year 998 along the ancient Via Francigena.

Both accommodations share a no hospitality-oriented structure, the original buildings are preserved and today represent the core of the hotels. Differently, from many hotels that have been built to create the most appropriate area for each hotel function (Cetin & Walls, 2016), Castello di Casole and Villa San Michele are hotels built on the original architectural structures: each hotel's function has been adapted to the already existing areas.

As said above, Villa San Michele was a church and the lobby is now positioned in the old church's nave and in the neighboring rooms. In spite of the change of use and the renovation work, the core of building maintains still today the characteristic elongated shape. Villa San Michele's lobby is not open space, rather it is a sum of different rooms. Front desk and concierge activities are hidden from the main door, providing the customers with a high level of privacy. The still consecrated church, the old closed cloister and, the XVI century Cenacle are the core of the lobby. The bar is located in another small closed cloister. All the rooms are connected to each other and in spite of many doors, the environment is perceived as a continuum.

Castello di Casole is a "dispersed hotel", functional areas and services are dislocated in different buildings. The management of the interior areas reflects the previous structure: the lobby is

¹ In March 2014 Orient-Express Hotels Ltd was renamed Belmond Ltd.

relocated in the old aristocrat castle and it is not an open space rather than a set of three separate rooms plus another one dedicated to Reception Bar. The rooms are one next to the other. Although the lobby is not an open environment, each room is connected with the others through one or two archways. There are no doors and it facilitates the circulation. Besides the room dedicated to the concierge and reception desk, the most significant one is the old living room. It is still today considered the core of the lobby: there are the ancient fireplace and comfortable sofas. The restoration operated in the castle aimed not simply to preserve the aristocratic nature of the building rather than to recreate the familiar environment for the guests.

Besides their peculiar architectural structure, both hotels are characterized by a strong connection with the local community. The reciprocal interconnection hotel-community occurs in terms of local products valorization. Art and food represent at the best the *Italianity* of both locations. If the food valorization takes place in the menus of both restaurants, the art one consists of an exhibitiv path: each hotel is characterized by its own artistic style. In Casole, there are more traditional-oriented pieces of art. Realized by local artists: many statues in wrought-iron are exposed in the common areas of the hotel and guide the guest from the reception to the rooms through the panoramic terrace. On the contrary, in Villa San Michele modern exhibitions by contemporary artists such as Clet, Blub, Exit/Enter, and Ghezzi are juxtaposed to the mediocrity of the building. As per general trend reported by Blank (2005) also in Casole and Villa San Michele, the jewelry stores have become smaller and replaced by the artistic exhibitions.

Given the previous use and the architectural peculiarities of the buildings, considered also that both are first class-category hotel and their offer is featured by strong artistic emphasis, the hotels lend themselves as an interesting case study for the present research.

3.4 Triangulation

Within the present project, the data have been collected through three different methods. In qualitative research, a combination of different methods is considered extremely important to triangulate the collected data. Triangulation is a scientific procedure that combines different methods using to study the same phenomenon. The confluence of pieces of evidence collected through different data sources provides the research with a great creditability. (Bowen, 2009; Bryman, 2012; Bhattacharjee, 2012)

Within the present research, empirical data have been collected through document analysis, participant observations, and qualitative interviews. Each one of the above-mentioned research methods aims to provide useful data to investigate the research question.

The document analysis consists of two parts, the first one analyzes the marketing material draft by the company and researches the concept of the value proposition of the hotels. Similarly, the second part investigates the customers' value perception. This latter analysis took place online on two of the most significant tourist platforms (Radojević, Stanišić, Stanić, & Šarac, 2014; Vizzoni, 2018)

Then, observations aim to evaluate the actual concretization of the value proposition from the hotels' side and the value perception in loco from the customers' one. Observations were thought a valid tool to gather information about the company's and also the customers' behavior while playing their own role given by the context.

Finally, a qualitative interview component was added to better and in deep discuss the central theme of the research: art hotels and customer value perception (Babbie, 2011; Bryman, 2012). Besides, the social component of the present study – based on Goffman's theories – has been investigated across the three methods.

3.5 Data collection - Document analysis

A document analysis consists of a systematic evaluation of print or virtual documents produced independently of any research purpose. In other words, the documents part of the present document analysis refer to different social contexts rather than to a case study. Despite the recent increase of document analysis as a research method, a clear procedure is still missing. The nature of the documents is wide and also the purpose of any document can be different; thus, document offers a rich phenomenon's overview. (Bowen, 2009) Generally speaking, document analysis uncovers meanings and facilitates comprehensions and investigation and it is a valid method to triangulate the collected data (Bowen, 2009).

In the present research, the document analysis aims to analyze both side of an exchange: suppliers and customers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The researcher combined marketing material produced by the hotels and the online reviews left by customers. The analysis of marketing material offered the opportunity to critically evaluate the mere value proposition from the company. The document analysis was conducted as first method before to investigate the concrete value proposition through the other research methods. On the contrary, the customer's side represent the value perception in the new virtual dimension of social

interactions (Bowler Jr., 2010). The opportunity to use documents available online was considered a strategic approach in response to the constant use of internet (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018).

In the beginning, netnography was considered a valid instrument to collect data. It is an ethnographic approach that observes and interprets the computer-based users' interactions (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). It provides global and real-time data (Bowler Jr., 2010; Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). Netnography was considered an appropriate research method also because of its direct value co-creative dimension (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). The first analysis of the available material the two platforms sampled for this researched drove the researcher toward a different research method. The necessity to analyze the content of each comment rather than the social interactive dimension of the user-community suggested to implement the document analysis rather than an ethnographic one.

The online interaction customers-suppliers occurs before, during and after the service delivery itself; thus, the reviews represent a complete *post-consumption* hotel-experience and could help in defining how a user experienced a tourist service (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Heinonen, et al., 2010). The current engagement of customers in online activities helps in defining a new form of trust in companies and in taking part in the value co-creation process before, during and after the service consumption (Lin, Yang, Ma, & Huang, 2018). An environmental analysis – as the one presented in this research – is related to an individual emotional sphere (Lin I. Y., 2004); thus, the analysis is complex and the opportunity to use the *post-consumption* impression helps to integrate the *on time* one (Nordhorn, Scuttari, & Pechlaner, 2018).

While conducting a document analysis, it is important to consider the different nature behind each category of documents. Besides, in sampling the marketing material as well as the users' contents, the researcher tried to fulfill the requirement of relevancy for this research topic. (Bowen, 2009).

3.5.1 The hotel's presentation

Organizational and institutional documents take various forms, each one offers different materials and insights (Bowen, 2009). Within the present research the official brochures were chosen because of their main aim to present the value of the service itself. Available for free online, even if not published on the website itself, they are considered a public document (Bryman, 2012). Addressed as a corporate presentation, the brochures' analysis is considered important especially when combined with participant observations and qualitative interviews

(Bryman, 2012). Each document presents services and features of the hotels, and while analyzing this material the researcher put her attention on the spatial component of the buildings, the furniture, and the artistic dimension.

3.5.2 The customers' perception

The customers' perception was researched online in the form of user-content creations. The current impact of online recommendations is extremely important to the service industry: one of the most stimulating elements in terms of customer loyalty and further purchases, brand awareness and customer engagement. (Herstein, Gilboa, Gamliel, Bergera, & Ali, 2018; Lin, Yang, Ma, & Huang, 2018).

The sampling process of the documents for the customers' side was longer and more complicated than the hotels' one. As first step, the researcher decided to use comments and reviews available on two of the most known *webpages*. The first one is www.booking.com: one of the most visited websites with regard to hotels and accommodations (Radojević, Stanišić, Stanić, & Šarac, 2014). The second source is TripAdvisor: the biggest worldwide tourist platform (Vizzoni, 2018).

The second step of the sampling process concerns the time-frame: Castello di Casole is part of Belmond Ltd. since February 2018 while Villa San Michele 1982; thus, the comments analyzed in the present research are those posted after the second purchase. The time criterium is thought an important element: being part of the same company provides both hotels with the same corporate culture, staff education and, even if the style of each hotel is different, a common trend in the furniture and in the artistic dimension.

Furthermore, using a filter option available on both platforms, comments were categorized according to the guest category. In both locations, couples resulted to be the main guest target; thus, the present research focuses on this customers' typology.

Analogously to any other method, the document analysis presents its own limitations. The most important consideration is about the document's authenticity especially "in the case of mass-media outputs" (Bryman, 2012, p. 553). Within the present research, the material collected online has been considered reliable: Booking.com guarantees the authenticity of the reviews because of its policies: only customers who booked through booking.com and overnighed at the property can write a review (Booking.com, 2018). Similarly, TripAdvisor commits itself to verify the reviews before the online publication. (Vizzoni, 2018)

3.6 Data collection - Observation

While conducting a field study one of the most important research methods is observation: it allows the researcher to be part of the social phenomenon and to observe and interpret the dynamics and the behaviors (Babbie, 2011; Bryman, 2012).

In conducting any observation, the definition of the nature of the place where the observation happens and how to access the place itself is one of the most important aspects. Social settings have different natures and accesses, according to the current literature companies are acknowledged as a non-public place (Bryman, 2012); thus, to conduct an observation in a similar context a negotiation with the company itself is required. The observations occurred in both hotels' lobbies: a public space part of a private company (Bengsch, 2016); thus, an official permission was asked, and the observations were authorized.

Besides, the generic advantages, observation is thought useful to collect data concerning how customers interact with a physical environment. The data collected – even if they represent just a sample of the material (Babbie, 2011) – provided important elements to discuss the second sub-question. However, observations present some limitations. The most significant concerns the nature of the collected data: they are fragmented and difficult to reproduce an overall picture and it is almost impossible to get the intentions behind the behavior (Bryman, 2012). Similarly, it is important to consider that, given the nature of the place (Bengsch, 2016), observations do not allow to recognize the nature of the presents: customers could be hotel guests as well as just daily ones; thus, they can interact and perceive the environment differently.

3.6.1 The pilot study

Before conducting the real observations, to better identify the core of the method itself, a pilot observation project was organized (Babbie, 2011; Bhattacharjee, 2012). It helped in identifying the most significant aspects to observe in a hotel lobby. As a result, while conducting the real observations the researcher was able to anticipate the environmental components, focusing on the customers' interactions.

The pilot observation took place in an uncategorized hotel chosen according to criteria similar to those used in the case study sample. Conducting the preliminary observations in a neutral environment, allowed the researcher to identify behavioral and environmental patterns beyond any further influence given by the presence of artworks.

Based on the first observation experiment, the researcher designed the data collection protocol beginning from a general scanning of the location itself. In this first phase of the observation,

the identification of the reception-desk, its accessibility and its structure were the most important element. Similarly, the researcher observed the availability and the accessibility of facilities such as plugs, Wi-Fi information, and toilettes. Once investigated the physical and architectural spaces of a lobby, the researcher focused on the social element of the area. The most important step concerned the identification of the staff from the customers. It was considered an important element because of the different degree of familiarity of the employees with the functional area and its furniture (Cetin & Walls, 2016).

As a result of the above pilot project, the researcher defined a thematic and logistic observations guideline where the observation of the customers' interaction comes later, in a sort of already investigated physical area (Babbie, 2011).

The pilot project provided the researcher also with other important elements to organize the field research such as the most suitable time for the observations. The time sample is important not just to collect data but also to make sure to observe the phenomenon at different times and on different days (Bryman, 2012). Weekends in the mornings and in the afternoons proved to be the most suitable timing for the observations due to the check-in and check-out procedures; thus, the major part of the observations took place in those time windows, but further observations were arranged also on weekdays.

Besides the time sample, people one is important: a random selection is considered a valid approach, further details in the next section.

As suggested by the literature (Babbie, 2011; Bryman, 2012) as well by the pilot phases, the researcher took several notes while observing. The process consisted of two stages: a preliminary draft *in situ*, the data were organized within an observational grid; then, in a second step the notes were re-elaborated and re-interpreted.

3.6.2 The role of the researcher

The above-mentioned pilot phase was useful also to determine the role of the observer in the present research. Generally speaking, the role of the researcher concerns his or her degree of participation and engagement in the social investigated dimension. The degree of participation determines also the interactions of the researcher with the investigated community. Lower is the interactive dimension of an observation, greater will be the attention paid to other research methods while triangulating the outcomes of the research itself. (Bryman, 2012)

In choosing her degree of engagement as observer, the researcher evaluates the access to the locations and the typology of the researched information (Bryman, 2012). Once defined the

topology of the area: a public place part of a private company (Bengsch, 2016), a naturalistic observation was chosen as approach. As results, the researcher did not manipulate or simulate the behavior of those observed, any situation was artificially recreated to facilitate or to speed up the data collection. (Bryman, 2012)

Given the previous considerations, the researcher decided to act as a covert full member, it consists in a full immersion into the studied community who is not aware of the real identity of the researcher (Bryman, 2012). The researcher decided to approach the community as a cover member of the same community. After a first observation conducted alone by the researcher, for the other sessions, the researcher asked the support of a colleague to better fit the social context. A full cover membership is thought a valid solution to access to a tourist community even if quite dated (Bengsch, 2016).

In defining her role, the researcher evaluated also the ethical considerations related to any social research – section 3.9.

As previously said the observations concerned two different accommodations part of the hotel and leisure company Belmond Ltd. Both are located in Tuscany and have seasonal openings: from April to October. The observations took place in April 2019.

3.7 Data collection - Qualitative interviews

Generally speaking, field research is characterized by the presence of the researcher in the social context where the investigated phenomenon takes place. However, sometimes a deeper analysis of complex social dynamics requires direct interaction with the investigated community. As a result, a qualitative interview component was added to the present research. It helped to clarify and evaluate more deeply a set of topics part of the present research. (Babbie, 2011) Specifically, it allows to investigate the customers' perception difficult to detect while observing.

The design of this third research method aims to fit in the nature of the research itself and also the limitations due to the company's policy. Since it was not possible to interview the hotels' customers and also to avoid bias, a focus group with a photo elicitation was arranged.

3.7.1 Focus Group

Among the possible different variations of interviews, a focus group was thought to be the most appropriate. It is a qualitative research method and it could be planned as structured or

unstructured group interview (Migliardi, 2004). It consists of the opportunity to interview a small group of participants at the same time within a given context focusing on specific theme. It emphasizes also the social interactive nature of any human interaction providing data about the social and interactive dimension beyond the investigated topic itself (Bryman, 2012; Migliardi, 2004). Moreover, a focus group offers money- and time-saving opportunities: it generates a significant quality and quantity of material, especially if compared with face-to-face interviews (Bryman, 2012).

Generally speaking, a focus group is a valid approach to investigate a social phenomenon and its interactive dimension (Babbie, 2011). Given the topic of the present research, a focus group seemed to be appropriate. In arranging a focus group is important to recreate a socially homogenous environment: participants' social and cultural features should fit the nature of the research and also the groups one.

Another important aspect concerns the professionals involved in a focus group. Usually, two professionals are required: a leader and an observer, they should complete different but complementary tasks (Bryman, 2012; Migliardi, 2004). Concerning the present work, the researcher covered both roles. This aspect could have affected the efficiency of the method, but all the aspects have been deeply analyzed. As an observer, the researcher contacted in advance the participants and defined the meeting in a neutral environment. Each participant was preliminary informed about the topic and the research method; then, an official communication concerning the privacy and the research anonymity was provided.

As a leader, the researcher decided to take a leading but not intrusive role trying to facilitate the discussion and ensure that everyone had the opportunity to be participative (Bhattacharjee, 2012) (Bryman, 2012). The active role of the researcher showed up just asking specific questions, introducing new thematic and to avoiding going off at a tangent (Babbie, 2011).

3.7.2 Participants presentation: focus group structure

To build up the focus groups of the present investigation, the researcher decided to gather natural groupings – couples – into a focus group of unknowns (Bryman, 2012). Combining the couples into a group of unknown participants, the researched aimed to recreate the natural environment of the selected hotels and to limit for-grant assumptions and totally “pre-existing” interactions. (Bryman, 2012)

Besides, according to outcomes provided by Fidzani (2002), female and male customers pay attention to different elements of an environment: respectively the “friendliness, warmth and

coziness” and the “design, available amenities and facilities” (p. 60); thus, an equal number of both was considered important to balance all the aspects of a location.

According to the literature, participants in focus groups tend not to be statistically representative: they are not chosen according to any rigorous probability-sampling method. On the contrary, as per much social research, a nonprobability sample helps to reach a more appropriate population for the research rather than a bigger one. Against this background, a purposive sample was considered appropriate to identify the participants of the present focus group. It allows to select and sample the participants according to the researcher’s opinion about their research representativeness. (Babbie, 2011)

As a result, three couples were invited to the focus group. From a sociodemographic point of view, the participants present similar aspects such as age and origin. The average is of 56 years old, the youngest is 39 years old and the oldest is 70. They come from the same geographical area and share a common passion for traveling. At the same time, they have completely different cultural and educational backgrounds. Since the beginning, all showed interest in the project. The day of the meeting, all couples showed up in the time at the arranged spot and from the beginning a familiar atmosphere occurred. Some participants were more active than others, but all contribute actively at conversation bringing interesting insights. As per the anonymity principle of the research, the names reported are artificial and do not refer to the actual participants.

While conducting the focus group, the participants seemed to be comfortable in exchanging opinions and experiences, but once concluded the recording process and the official interview was over, the participants kept talking to each other providing the researcher with important and spontaneous considerations. As a result, the researcher asked them the permission to use the extra. Since all of them agreed, these extra considerations were integrated in the outcome of the present research.

3.7.3 Photo elicitation

Photo elicitation is an evocative research method and it consists of the insertion of photos into a research interview (Harper, 2002; Bignante, 2010). The use of photos within an interview creates a so-called scenario approach. Widely used in previous environmental research, it represents a worthy replacement of in loco interviews. (Countryman & Jang, 2006) According to Countryman & Jang (2006) a scenario approach positively affects the quality of the research. First of all, in photos or videos any identification elements and brand names can be omitted,

and biases-free circumstances can be created. Secondly, within an artificial setting, a higher degree of control of external elements is possible. However, it is important to underline that a scenario approach could recreate physical environment but not get aural, olfactory and tactile perceptions, and it could limit some types of perceptions (Fidzani, 2002).

Another important consideration is about the impossibility to not interview actual customers of the hotels. This circumstance has been long thought and finally integrated into the research: the value perception of actual customers might be affected by other elements rather than the mere artistic dimension of the hotels (Countryman & Jang, 2006).

As a final consideration this research method offers the opportunity to study not simply the images rather than how the participants respond to them in terms of “social and personal meanings and values” (Bignante, 2010, p. 2)

Photo elicitation and scenario approach do have their own limitations. Besides the impossibility to re-create a complete physical setting, photos could affect the different part of human consciousness evoking past and different emotions (Harper, 2002). In conjunction with these generic limitations, while presenting the project to the legal represent of the company, a problem concerning the safeguard of the photos’ rights arose. Thus, the pictures used in the present research are part of the selection prepared by the company itself for the media. The photos used are attached in Appendix section 8.2.

3.8 Data Analysis

The data analysis consists of the application of the research strategy, in other words, once identified what to analyze is essential to define how to do that. And in case of the field research or case study a qualitative analysis is suggested (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009; Babbie, 2011; Bryman, 2012). Generally speaking, the aim of qualitative analysis is to “make sense” of the investigated phenomenon through the empirical data (Bhattacharjee, 2012). At the same time, the qualitative strategy can be combined with the quantitative one, especially in the preliminary steps of the analysis. One of the most significant advantages of this approach consists in the opportunity to quantify but at the same time to interpret the meaning of the detected themes. (Bowler Jr., 2010; Bryman, 2012) The understanding of the data occurs in a nonnumerical examination of the collected material (Babbie, 2011). Qualitative research can be carried out through the implementation of different methods, but a constant interaction between theories and data as well as a coding process are required (Babbie, 2011; Bryman,

2012). A coding process consists in the identification of recurring themes that can be gathered together and further analyzed.

Considering the previous research (Lin I. Y., 2004; Countryman & Jang, 2006) and the collected material, in the present analysis different themes arose. For each research method, a specific coding process has been developed.

The themes used in each in the analysis of research method have been used as preliminary ones to define the foundations for the overall and final data analysis. (Babbie, 2011)

3.8.1 Document Analysis: Themes

The online reviews as well the company's brochures present several themes; the analysis of all them allowed the identification of the artistic dimension of the accommodations. In both categories six common themes are detected:

- Service,
- View,
- Food,
- Decoration & art,
- Location, and
- Property.

While analyzing the online reviews a seventh theme arose and it concerns the "staff" – not properly presented in the brochures

In defining the above-mentioned codes, the present research method aimed to investigate and probe if the value presented by the company is perceived and reported by the customers.

3.8.2 Observation: thematic guidelines

The analysis of the data collected while observing was facilitated by the guidelines defined during the pilot phase and also by the staff of both hotels. In occasion of the first access both in Casole and in Fiesole the respective head of concierge guided the researcher through the lobbies and common areas of the hotels. It was an extremely useful opportunity to visit the structure and to understand how the environment is perceived and used by the employees.

Then, according to guidelines defined during the pilot phase, the attention was primarily put on the buildings and the architectural structures. Then, the second aspect of the observation concerned the facilities and the services' accessibility. Finally, the researched focused on the human and interactive dimension of the hotels.

It is important to note that the order was not based on the elements' importance, rather than on the opportunity to better identify each aspect. In both structures a great accessibility is detected, and – in spite of the previous building use characterized by relatively small and separated rooms - the environment is perceived and presented as a continuum.

3.8.3 Focus Group: Themes

The focus group was organized as a semi-structured interview and framed within a holiday context: participants were told they were checking-in a hotel for a holiday and they were asked to evaluate the lobby environment in terms of their perceived value in relation to the physical component and the pieces of art exposed in the hotels. Two main themes were covered during the interview. The first one concerns the participants' attitude as travelers and as consumers of a temporary servicescape. A specific focus was put on how they judge other costumers' opinions. The second theme regards participants' interaction with furniture and eventual artworks present in hotels. While discussing this second themes, the selected photos were introduced, and the participants asked to discuss lobbies' furniture and environments.

The dimension of value co-creation has been researched through the analysis of the value perception from the customer side. To better understand how the physical environment could create an added value the themes suggested by Countryman & Jang (2006) were reserched in the interview:

- Style;
- Layout;
- Colors;
- Lighting;
- Furnishings.

3.9 Ethical considerations

In conducting any social research ethical considerations arose. Given the topic of the research, that does not concern any ethically sensitive issues such as religion, political ideology or medical issues, ethics was analyzed according to the four-principle guideline suggested by Diener and Crandall (1978) in Bryman (2012):

- Harm to participants;
- Lack of informed consent;

- Invasion of privacy and
- Deception.

Focusing on the above issues a shift of meaning occurs from “ethics” to “proper” as coded by researchers and participants (Babbie, 2011). Each one of the previous considerations is not related exclusively to the research-design phase and data collection, but also to the post-research phases – such as data analysis and protection, especially in terms of participants anonymity. The confidentiality of the research has been guaranteed: pseudonymizes were used and no disclosure would be authorized.

Concerning the informed consent, the focus-group participants were informed as per the informative document available in the Appendix, 9.1. On the contrary, the observations in loco were approved by Belmont Ltd. It was considered necessary in respect of the employees who play a special role within the observed context. Concerning the guests of each structure any informed consent was requested: obtaining an informed one might have influenced the data collection itself (Bensch, 2016). Besides, the nature of the research – focusing on the mere physical interactions and the non-verbal communication of customers and the environment – did not require to record or analyze any conversations occurred at the front desk or in any other social circumstances in the lobby. As per Bensch (2016), this is an important consideration because generally speaking service encounters have a public connotation but hotels due to their notion of “home away from home” create semi-private or semi-public context; thus, customers expect a trust-based social exchange.

3.10 Limitations

Before proceeding with the analysis of the results, it is important to underline the limitations of the present work.

The most important consideration concerns the design of the research: a case study. As per Hussein et. al (2018) within a case study the cultural differences and the impossibility to generalize the outcomes represent the most significant limitation. However, the theories and the approaches used as a tool could can be replicated to conduct other case studies.

Further limitations are given by the strategy of the research: a qualitative one. Generally speaking, researchers consider qualitative study as unsystematic and affected by the intrusive presence of the researcher. (Bryman, 2012) More specifically qualitative research is thought to be difficult to replicate because of their contextualization with the investigated social phenomenon (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009) and because of the lack of standard procedures

(Bryman, 2012). Similarly, the outcomes are too specific to be generalized, models and trends cannot be defined. However, the generalizability issue of qualitative research has been reformulated in terms of *moderatum* generalization (Payne & Williams, 2005; Bryman, 2012). *Moderatum* generalization implies a more modest generalization process that has a more hypothetical rather than statement character (Payne & Williams, 2005). Qualitative research can also be compared and linked together (Bryman, 2012). As a result, the present research is thought to provide an overall even if still limited overview of the investigated phenomenon.

Besides, this case study presents further and more specific restrictions. The data collection took place in just two hotels, both of them with a seasonal opening. In terms of available material, it affects the total amount of the empirical evidence also because of the low tourist season in the region. Furthermore, the company's policy concerning customers' and employees' privacy limited the implementation of some research methods. For example, the company did not authorize to interview guests and visitors, as well it did not authorize to take any photos to use in the focus group.

Finally, the core of the research itself: the customers' interaction and perception of the artistic temperament of the lobbies was difficult to detect. The implemented methods are considered appropriate, their reliability has been proved while triangulating the outcomes.

4 Analysis of the results

This section aims to present and analyze the results collected by the application of the above-mentioned research methods. Collected data were investigated through a thematic analysis. In spite of the themes used in the document analysis and in the focus group, wider and more comprehensive *leitmotifs* arose. Given the outcomes, the results were interpreted according to two main themes: the *presentation of the self* and the *value co-creation process*. The *value co-creation* is analyzed as value proposition and value perception-acceptance.

Both have been analyzed as opposition of a front- and a back-stage region as per Goffman's theories. The two themes are considered to be interdependent, a sort of two sides of the same aspect. The *presentation of the self* – detected while observing the social dynamics in the hotels' lobbies – is thought to be the concrete implementation of the value proposition revealed in the document analysis. The aim was to research a concrete realization in loco of the value advanced in the brochures. Similarly, the customer value perception has been researched while observing customers moving around the lobbies as well as analyzing their online comments. Likewise,

the focus group offered to opportunity to observe and reveal the co-existence of front and back-stage dimension of hotel customers in terms of presentation of the self and value perception.

4.1 *The value co-creation: proposition and perception*

As said before the value dimension of the research has been detected while analyzing the documents. The hotels' brochures are considered their value proposition and according to that information the *presentation of self* of both accommodations should be built in terms of services and environment, setting and social interactions. Similarly, the customer value perception has been researched while analyzing their comments on tourist platform.

A *value co-creation* process consists of a combination of resources: some provided by each company to its own customers in order to make them able to complete a specific *value co-creation* process. While others already held by the customers; the new skills should be complementary with the old ones. (Grönroos, 2008)

4.1.1 The value proposition – The hotels' side

The brochures are considered the hotels' value proposition tool: a 48-page booklet downloadable for free from the company website. Each one is subdivided into five chapters dedicated to specific topics. The first one introduces the reader-visitor to the geographical location of Castello di Casole and Villa San Michele respectively the Tuscan countryside and Florence. Besides the geographical details, the first chapter of Villa San Michele provides also a comprehensive introduction to the region with suggestions about food and wine that are carefully blended with cultural insights. On the contrary, the first chapter of Castello di Casole emphasizes just the natural surroundings of the hotel. Both brochures underline the presence of pieces of art and especially in the brochures of Villa San Michele there is a section *Our Living Gallery* – dedicated to artworks and artists. In this section, the artistic attitude is presented in terms of experiences to do inside and outside of the hotel. Concerning the inside engagement, collaborations and exhibitions are described, local artists listed, and artistic workshops suggested. The outside dimension of the artistic background refers to artistic tours to artisans' laboratories in the countryside where traditional techniques are compared with modern installations. This juxtaposition has been observed also in the choice of the exposed artists.

In chapter three and four – *Within our Walls* and *Our & About* – services and facilities inside and outside the hotel are accurately presented. The last chapter introduces the reader-visitor to the other Belmond hotels around the world.

Both brochures generally present the hotels, regular hotel facilities are integrated with innovative and peculiar services: artistic labs and tours, workshops and experiences. Moreover, the descriptions are mixed with photos and descriptions. Besides, the artists are presented together with their own artistic techniques. As a result, the overall presentation paints a high-quality hotel where a “full array of services and amenities” (Barrows, Powers, & Reynolds, 2012, p. 279) occurs within a strongly artistic oriented environment. Given the role of the brochures to present the value of the hotels as product and service, the artistic dimension is perceived as an integral part of the hotel-experience. As a result, the tangibilization of this aspect is expected to occur as well as the one of the other services and facilities presented in the brochures.

4.1.2 The value acceptance – The customers’ side

As per the hotels’ side, the document analysis offered the opportunity to investigate the value and especially the customers’ value perception. It can be considered a sort of value perception or better acceptance. The switch from value perception (Grönroos, 2008) to acceptance aims to stress that the value proposition has been done and that now the value co-creation process depend on the customers that can recognize and accept it.

The reviews sampled for this research offered a quite overall picture of the hotels. The general trends suggests that the users who write a comment prefer to use a sort of sector-specific language. Likewise, the comments are structured as a sort of dairy: from the beginning of the hotel-experience, the check-in procedure, till the end, the check-out one. These data confirm how the current tourist customers are prepared and experienced, able to properly interact and relate to a hotel context (Thapa, 2007).

Generally speaking, the major part of the comments focus on the mere hotel-experience, just a few of them report further details such trips in closer villages or experiences and tours in the countryside. The reviews represent the perspective of someone who is writing about a hotel-experience for someone who is reading about a hotel. Analyzed according to the seven themes indicated in the methodology (service, view, food, decoration & furniture, location, property, and staff) online comments pointed out that majority of the customers appreciated the conventional elements of a hotel’s identity such as high-quality service, friendly staff and good

property and location. The artistic dimension of the hotels is not generally reported. Similarly, just a few users integrate the presence of the artworks in their comments. When it occurs, it is just one of several pointed out aspects, and it is generally the last one to be listed. The few comments that report the presence of the pieces of art use an artistic appropriate and adequate language. The artistic value of the artworks is perceived and reported, the descriptions and the details provided by the users suggested adequate resources from the customers' side to take actively part at the *value co-creation* process.

4.2 The *presentation of the self*

The second theme of the present analysis is the concept of *presentation of the self*. Within this research, it is used in a broader dimension: it is not simply referred to an individual's presentation within a socially given context (Dillard, Browning, Sitkin, & Sutcliffe, 2000) but also to a company's one. Even if in different forms, also the hotels are requested to present themselves to an audience within a socially framed reality. For example, both accommodations part of this case study are not just hotels, they are part of a hotel chain, they compete on a luxury market and more generally they operate in a specific economic sector; thus, certain parameters and requirements need to be fulfilled.

4.2.1 The hotels present themselves

As previously mentioned, *the presentation of the self* is thought to be the translation in practice of the value proposition; thus, the hotels are considered to present themselves once tangibilize their own *value proposition*. The six themes arose in the document analysis of the hotels' marketing material are compacted in three main aspects: facilities (service and food), spatial component (location, property, and view), and decorations (Babbie, 2011). The first two are typical of any *hotellerie* context, while the presence of pieces of art is an extra element that aims to award the accommodations with a unique atmosphere (Blank, 2005; Bonansinga, 2016; Fox, 2017).

Besides the three main themes, also the historical component emphasized in the value proposition of both locations is now an integral part of the hotel-experience: through sumptuous restoration each room, previous dedicated to another use, is functional to the hotel.

However, once it comes to the concrete *presentation of the self*, the realization of the value proposition seems to tangibilize some aspects rather than others. The translation in practice of

three main aspects – facilities, spatial component, and decoration – takes place especially concerning the facilities and spatial component. The physical design of both locations provides customers with a complete and clear set of social and practical information concerning the expected behaviors. As a result, the social collective is acting faithfully to the script of a hotel context. For example, the receptionist takes care of check-in and check-out procedures, the concierge provides information, and the bartender takes orders and serves fancy drinks. In accordance with the environmental dimension, also services and other facilities are well integrated into the context. The information presented in the brochures are clearly translated in *in loco* directions: each functional area is well designed and indicated, the restaurants, the pool as well as the spa are easy to find. Apparently, also the artistic emphasis is presented: both locations are arranged in a sort of artistic path that introduces guests and visitors in a self-guided tour through the most significant areas of the hotels. In lines with the descriptions of the brochures, there is a combination of old and new and contemporary artists meet medieval contexts. In Casole the statues are mainly located outside the building, along the patio, on the panoramic terrace, and on the poolside. On the contrary, in Villa San Michele, the paintings are inside the building, some are part of the original structure while others have been recently added within the current art-oriented dimension of the hotel.

A more detailed analysis of the artistic value proposition suggested that it has not been properly and completely translated in practice. *In loco* there is no information regarding the works of art exposed and in the same way any member of the staff acts as a guide or as a museum surveillance. The artistic value proposition seems to be incomplete. While defining their own value proposition, both hotels try to offer a different and unique cut to their products, but when it comes to the value proposition translation, they seem to stick to a script typical of any hotel: they adhere to an already socially framed identity. As overall impression, it is clear that these buildings are still hotels but featured by a strong artistic interest.

4.2.2 The customers present themselves

Similarly, the customers' presentation is based on Goffman's theories and was detected *in loco* as well as online. Observations and document analysis provide valuable insights.

Within the above described hotel-oriented context, guests and customers are invited, as in many other social frame contexts, to play their role. And it occurs: they interact with each other, with the staff, and with furniture. Customers touch and play with chairs and tables even if they are not using them. For example, more guests before ordering their drink at the bar desk touched

and moved a bar stool even if they were not sitting there and did not do that even after the order. Similarly, while talking to each other more than one guest was noted touching a piece of furniture while not properly using it. And it was noticed also during the pilot phase of the observations that took place in an uncategorized hotel, where no pieces of art are exposed. The gathered data suggest that customers present themselves as guests as in any other hotel. Interestingly, in both location a common element was noticed concerning how guests choose where to sit while ordering a drink, waiting for someone or just relaxing. Even if the staff always suggests a table rather than another one, the majority of the guests seems to prefer a position closer to a painting or a statue. It is thought to be significant report also how more than groups stopped in front a statue or a painting to greet each other: both lobbies are spacious, and it seems there is not any specific reason to stop in front of a piece of art. This attitude is thought to be a sort of indirect interaction with the pieces of art as if a direct one was not allowed by the context. As previously reported, there no indication concerning the artworks and the requested behavior. No one directly interacted with painting or statues, just one guest was noted taking a photo to piece of art in Casole. On the contrary, both in Villa San Michele and at the Castello di Casole more than one guest took pictures of and with the surrounding landscape. In reporting this aspect of the customers interaction with the spatial component, two aspects should be considered. The first one concerns the demographic analysis of the guests, the only one taking a photo at one of the statues was younger than the average, but not the only young guest. The second aspect is indeed more generic, and it regards the individual preparation of a guest to a specific setting. Generally speaking, hotel customers already known how to interact with the hotel staff, how to move around the different functional areas of a hotel and how to approach the surroundings of any accommodation (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012). On the contrary, the artistic side of both hotels seems to be something unexpected and out of the socially framed dimension of a hotel. Therefore, customers interaction and behavior could be limited, and it could affect also their own presentation.

4.2.3 The focus group

In virtue of the methodology section, the data arising in the focus group are the result of an official and an unofficial discussion. The latter was spontaneously and autonomously established by the participants. Comparing and combining the two data sources, a more complete analysis of the value of the spatial component in hotels was drawn.

In the official interview, the three couples reported similar criteria in evaluating and choosing a hotel for a holiday. No one of the participants reported a strong interest concerning the physical or artistic dimension of a hotel. The spatial component was said to not be actively researched as a valuable element of a hotel. Other services and facilities were mentioned because more significant in defining a hotel's value such as the price-quality ratio, the cleanliness, and the location-accessibility. To probe how the spatial component would have been reported by the participants in review, they were directly asked about and all agreed: they would have not reported the physical component of a hotel in a review. They would have dwell on other elements, those researched: price and cleanliness, staff and accessibility. Given the elements reported in the discussion, all participants seem to perfectly act as hotel-guests according to that socially given role (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012). Once identified the general pattern, the participants were asked to evaluate the specific physical environment of the hotels part of this study. While commenting on the pictures, all participants appreciated the beauty and the charm of both locations. Especially Castello di Casole with its Tuscan style was praised. Differently, just one of the participants (Amleto) expressed his interest in the artworks exposed in Villa San Michele. The presence of those paintings in that given context would have engaged him in a deeper analysis of the environment. Amleto he is the only of the group to have an artistic background, he is an architect and art professor. This detail is considered an important element: his education provided him with the required skills – resources – to complete the artistic value proposition suggested by the company. On the contrary, Ginevra defined the design “too full” and not clearly recognizable. These comments suggest that customer recognize and interact much more directly with the *presentation of the self* rather than the value proposition.

As said before, once the focus group was over the unofficial discussion began. Participants started sharing their own previous experiences and giving each other advises, and a completely different attitude concerning hotels and tourist accommodations arose. In Goffman's words, the couples seemed to remove their mask (Dillard, Browning, Sitkin, & Sutcliffe, 2000). Dante and Beatrice revealed to be the most experienced in traveling: their initial research for a comfortable accommodation moved toward a more local and authentic oriented dimension of the settings and the furniture. Their main goal is to judge an accommodation without their Western filter, they try to combine a hotel's services and facilities within the social and cultural context where it is set. Even if they do not actively research for any specific spatial and environmental component, Dante and Beatrice shared with the others their experience in Cambodia, where they overnighted in a luxurious and well-furnished hotel. The spatial design

was particularly polished and refined and it represents still today, after years, one of the most significant aspects of that trip. Likewise, Amleto and Ofelia underlined their research for unconventional accommodations rather than luxurious environments: they traveled in Spain for more than 10 days and they have never slept in a proper tourist accommodation. As per their words, this traveling attitude is based on Amleto's interest in architecture and art. On the contrary, Ginevra and Lanciollotto confirmed what said in the official part of the interview: their own concern while booking a hotel is the location, the accessibility, and the cleanliness. The present outcomes seem to fit well in the identified themes and offer an interesting starting point to discuss and investigate the research questions.

5 Discussion

The aim of this chapter is to analytic discuss the findings of the research and to demonstrate how the implemented methods properly investigated the research questions.

The first important consideration concerns the nature of the studied functional area: the present research confirms how lobbies are a complete and independent servicescape part of a bigger social dimension (Lin I. Y., 2004; Countryman & Jang, 2006). According to the data collected in the focus group and in the observations, the front-desk – traditionally the core of a lobby (Barrows, Powers, & Reynolds, 2012) – proved to be just one of the elements of the area. More customers were observed spending a long time in the lobbies beyond their check-in or check-out procedures. Similarly, no one of the participants, while commenting on the photos of the two lobbies, mentioned it: it was always associated more generally to the staff. Thus, the present research reconfirmed the social interactive dimension of hotel lobbies as already verified by previous research (Lin I. Y., 2004; Countryman & Jang, 2006).

Before investigating each research question and discussing the outcomes, given the incomplete artistic value proposition of the hotels part of the present research the author will refer to this aspect as *artistic temperament*. As per the Cambridge Dictionary (2019) “temperament” represents a part of an attitude; within the present project, the concept of artistic *temperament* aims to describe the incomplete artistic value proposition. In the hotels, an innovating attitude is perceived but it not enough accentuated to be integrated into the hotel experience and to define the genre itself.

5.1 Hotels' artistic temperament: *value proposition* and *presentation of the self*

At first glance, the hotels seem to integrate artworks in their value proposition as well as in their *presentation of the self*. The document analyses showed that each location emphasizes its own interest in reshaping the hotel context and the guest experience through statues and paintings. As a result, the *presentation of the self* is expected to be a combination of hotel and art gallery settings. Both hotels present many artworks in the lobby and in the common areas next to the front desk and an artistic atmosphere is recreated. However, the inclusion of the pieces of art within the hotels is not perceived as consolidated. A hotel is defined as an art one when it harmonically integrates the artworks in its setting; a clear integration of the different elements is necessary to identify a hotel's genre (Blank, 2005; Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012). Art hotels can increase their added value when they expose artworks from local artists and value the local cultural heritage. The integrative process needs to be accurate and complete in every one of its parts. (Blank, 2005) The presence of pieces of art in hotel contexts could improve the customer experience, but the presentation and disposition of the artworks need to become an integral part of the setting (Blank, 2005; Bonansinga, 2016; Fox, 2017). Besides, the integration of statues and paintings in lobbies and common areas can change the social frames of the hotel context. Indeed, social frames are not fixed, and the social expectations can evolve, but to make it happens the setting, the audience and the performer need to share the same institutionalized context (Whiteside & Kelly, 2015; Lorino, Mourey, & Schmidt, 2017)

In the case of Castello di Casole and Villa San Michele, the presence of the pieces of art is not integrated into the hotel setting. Both hotels expose pieces of art realized by local artists and in their value proposition (brochures) promote the local laboratories and traditions. However, in the *presentation of self*, there are no descriptive labels next to the artworks, no information about the artists or how to contact them; thus, the local origin of the artworks is not translated in practice. The absence of these kinds of information affects not simply the opportunity to enhance the local dimension of the exhibition, but also the artistic dimension itself that, as previously said, is not properly clarified and perceived just as temperament. In their presentation, hotels provide information about their services such as bar opening hours and restaurant menus, spa facilities and conducts in the pool area, but no information about how to behave with the exhibitions are provided.

As a result, Castello di Casole and Villa San Michele present an unclear setting, the hotel context is not properly reframed as an art hotel.

Both hotels seem to emphasize their artistic interest much more on their theoretical value proposition in the brochures rather than in the concrete realization *in situ*. The *presentation of the self* is clear only on the paper where the hotel genre is well-defined. Once it comes to translation in practice, both accommodations present themselves much more as uncategorized hotels rather than as art hotels.

5.2 Customers and art: value perception and interaction

The second sub-question of the present research investigates how customers relate to the art present in the hotels. The empirical data collected in the observations and in the document analysis present a quite clear overall picture. First of all, it is important to remember that hotel customers are part of the a given the community of hotel guests and, as a consequence, they need to present themselves according to specific behavioral rules (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012). Their connection with the environment and their value perception are strictly related to the theme of the *presentation of the self* and it can take place *in loco* as well as online. Online platforms are another facet of the front-stage region where individuals are expected to script to a specific role, just as in the face-to-face interactions. Both realities are regulated by socially given constrictions that alter human's behavior. (Sociological Perspectives on Stigmatized Online Communities., 2014)

As mentioned in the literature, the physical context affects human behavior and nonverbal communication (Bluea & Harunb, 2003). In the observations, a constant interaction of customers with the physical setting, especially with the furniture was detected: chairs, tables but also facilities such as plugs and abat-jour. On the contrary, just one guest directly interacted with a piece of art. As reported in the literature, different kinds of art interaction are possible and generally unexpected forms of interaction occur (Carroll, 1986). The analysis of the results suggested that many customers interacted with paintings and statues, but their approach is thought to be indirect. An indirect interaction could be the result of the environment itself rather than of low interest in the art. As previously said both hotels present an unconventional setting, and the lack of a specifically and socially framed context does not facilitate a clear interaction of the customers with the pieces of art. Thus, the no direct interaction of customers with the pieces of art could be attributed to the inharmonious integration of the artworks in the context itself, as discussed in the previous section.

At the same time, it is important to remember that the customers' interaction with the physical component is part of the *presentation of the self*. Considering this aspect, the indirect interaction

could be also the result of the lack of a cohesive hotel presentation. As the hotels' *presentation of the self* is not complete, similarly customers are not properly engaged in the artistic stimulus and keep their *presentation of the self* script to a socially given hotel context.

The opportunity to better understand the interaction of customers with the physical environment occurred in the focus group. As reported in the results, all participants appreciated the beauty and the charm of both locations but only one of the members – Amleto – expressed his interest in the artworks. In the value co-creation context, Amleto's interest could represent the achievement of the *value co-creation* process: his interest represents the value acceptance as expected by the hotels and it could lead to a complete art hotel experience (Blank, 2005; Bonansinga, 2016; Fox, 2017). The achievement of this *value co-creation* process seems possible much more because of the customers' side rather than the hotels' one that, as previously said, is characterized by an incomplete translation in practice of the value proposition. Due to his educational background - he is an architect and art professor -, Amleto has much more resources than a regular guest and it facilitates him to actively take part at the *value co-creation* process; thus, he can compensate to the incomplete hotel's value proposition. Interestingly, Amleto does not refer to the mere beauty of the installations rather to the interest that those artworks stimulate in him. According to the literature, individuals react differently to each artistic stimulus (Carroll, 1986; Silvia, 2005). While the participants were commenting about their perception of the environment and an eventual interaction in the hotels part of the study, Ginevra said that in Villa San Michele the environment was "too full". She also added that the setting was unclear to her because of the combination of different elements such as contemporary paintings just behind the front desk. Amleto's and Ginevra's comments suggest a completely different perception and interaction with the environment. A so different interpretation of the presence of art in the hotels could be due to the different background and the different resources brought in the value co-creation process. However, it is important to remember that no environment can be comfortable for everyone: each individual responds differently to the same stimuli (Thapa, 2007).

Given the regulated nature of the online communities, the document analysis of the online reviews offers the opportunity to analyze another aspect of a customer's *presentation of the self* (Sociological Perspectives on Stigmatized Online Communities., 2014). The document analysis aimed to research guests' perceptions and interpretations of the hotel experience in the *post-consumption* time frame. According to the results analyzed in the previous chapter, both hotels report an excellent rating: services and staff, location and views are widely appreciated. Among the seven themes used in the reviews' analysis, *Decoration & art* has proved to be the less

mentioned. As a preliminary consideration, the artistic temperament could seem neither a positive nor a negative component of the setting and of the hotel-experience. However, when this result is combined with the incomplete implementation of the *value proposition* in the *presentation of the self* of the hotels and with the constant indirect interaction of the customers with the artworks, a clearer picture occurs. The online reviews reported an incomplete *presentation of the self* of customers similar to the one that occurs also *in situ*. From a social point of view, the hotels, as well as the online platforms, require the customers-users to play a socially given script. Similarly, to the hotel-experience itself, also once it comes to the online comments the *value co-creation* process seems to be unfinished and strictly related to the socially given hotel context. As mentioned before, the online reviews are written in the perspective of a hotel guest for another hotel guest.

Going back to the second sub-question “How do customers relate to the pieces of art in the hotels?” seems clear that customers do perceive the presence of the artworks, but their interaction is limited to and by the social context.

5.3 *Value co-creation*: approaches and trends

Define what kind of value customers can co-create with the pieces of art exposed in the hotels proved to be difficult especially because of the impossibility to interview the actual customers. At the same time, the triangulation of the data collected in the observations, in the document analysis, and in the focus group helped in defining an overall picture. According to the literature both customers and suppliers need to take part in the value co-creation process bringing their own resources (Grönroos, 2008). When art hotels fulfill their *value proposition* and their *presentation of the self* they properly integrate hospitality services and art gallery’s ones (Blank, 2005; Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012; Fox, 2017). In similar circumstances, customers can create their own complete experience that is not properly a hotel or a museum but where an understandable and unequivocal social context is provided (Bonansinga, 2016).

Following the outcomes of the present research, the value proposition of Castello di Casole and Villa San Michele is perceived to be clear and complete in all its parts. However, the hotels do not implement it and their settings cannot be considered properly as art hotel ones: art and hospitality are not integrally combined. This has been defined as *artistic temperament*. As a consequence, the value co-creation process would be uncompleted and the customers would not be able to get the extra value suggested in the literature (Blank, 2005; Bonansinga, 2016; Wang, Tang, & Cheng, 2018). The added value would be affected by the unclear setting:

customers will not be able to recognize the social frame. Evidence of this aspect is the indirect interaction of customers with the paintings and statutes: it does not represent the complete *value co-creation* process.

The indirect interaction of customer could have or not increased their interest in the art itself, it could have also suggested them to visit a museum rather than another one. Unfortunately, as per the current empirical material, it is impossible to develop further this aspect. However, the online reviews, while mentioning the artistic temperament of the accommodations, suggested that the artworks were a pleasant surprise that improved the quality of the service. Similarly, the interest showed by one of the members of the focus group would have improved his hotel experience due to the possibility to interact with those pieces of art.

If the previous literature suggested that a complete value co-creation occurs when the hospitality is blended with the art (Blank, 2005; Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012; Bonansinga, 2016; Fox, 2017), the empirical data confirm it. Moreover, the present case study suggests that also in case of an incomplete *value co-creation* process, customers can improve their hotel experience. It would occur in a form different from the expected one, and it would be decontextualized from the hotel setting itself. Based on the testimonies collected in the focus group, two of three couples while sharing their traveling experiences underlined how the specific settings positively influenced their trips. However, they did not reconnect that aspect directly to the hotel experience itself. As reported in the previous section, the couples positively commented on the value of a setting's accommodation while the official focus group was over: they were no longer travelers rather than acquaintances. Besides the social context that as previously said could have affected their behavior, it is important to highlight how those accommodations according to the participants' experiences did not combine the art and with their room-rental service, an essential element to provide an art hotel experience (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012). Similar to Castello di Casole and Villa San Michele, the accommodations mentioned in the focus group are thought to have implemented an incomplete artistic value proposition. The presence of the art is perceived but not included in the hotel experience itself.

To conclude, customers can create different kinds of value while interacting with artworks in a hotel context. In case of a complete presentation and inclusion of the art in the offer, the value will be part of the hotel experience, as stated in the previous literature (Blank, 2005; Bonansinga, 2016; Fox, 2017). On the contrary, in case of an incomplete *value co-creation* related to the presence of artworks in the hotel and of an artistic temperament of the

accommodation, an extra value would be perceived, but it would be not associated to the hotel experience. Customers would recognize the beauty and the charm of the context, they would identify and appreciate the presence of the artworks, but they would not consider it as an extra service of the hotel. The lack of a complete presentation of the value proposition from the hotel side and of adequate resources on the customers' one would not allow the customers to distinguish an art hotel-experience from an uncategorized hotel. In case of an incomplete value proposition from the hotel side, the previous tools and resources held by each customer would differently affect the value co-creation process. Customers' specific resources could facilitate or complicate every customer-supplier exchange and lead to the creation of different values. In evaluating the individual resources of each customer is it important to keep in mind the customer target as a whole but also other socio-demographic parameters such age and culture, education and profession. For this reason, the resources provided by the supplier should fit the nature of the value proposition itself providing everyone with the required guidelines to take part in the value co-creation.

5.4 The value of the art hotels through Goffman's theories

This last section of the chapter aims to read the previous outcomes concerning the *presentation of the self* and *value co-creation* process through the theatrical metaphor suggested by Goffman. In line with the literature used and corroborated by the collected data, hotels constitute a social context where individuals are suggested to present themselves according to a hotel-oriented context: exceptions and obligations are socially controlled (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012). The general behavioral trend changes and adapts in case of each specific hotel genre: the genre does not define the mere design of a hotel rather than the social dynamics and interactions (Strannegård & Strannegård, 2012). As previously reported, the social frames can change when the three elements of a social exchange – setting, performer and audience – share a new asset (Sociological Perspectives on Stigmatized Online Communities., 2014; Whiteside & Kelly, 2015; Lorino, Mourey, & Schmidt, 2017). In accord with the data collected in the present research, both hotels aim to define their one genre as an art hotel, but they have not reframed their context yet: an artistic temperament is revealed, but the situational expectations still refer to an uncategorized hotel. Out of three elements part of a social exchange, just one – the setting – is perceived as in evolution due to the presence of statues and paintings, even if it is not enough to reframe a setting. On the contrary, the performer and the audience present themselves only playing the social role given by a hotel context rather than art gallery' ones.

As indicated in the methodology, the theatrical metaphor has been used as a tool of analysis of the collected data.

The contrast of a front- and a back-stage region is perceived across the three research methods. The *presentation of the self* of the hotels in terms of setting and tangibilization of the value proposition, the customers' interaction in loco and online, and also the official part of the focus represent the front-stage region. The company and the customers, the online users and the focus group participants are thought to play – as per Goffman (*Sociological Perspectives on Stigmatized Online Communities.*, 2014) – a given role defined by the context. On the contrary, the hotels' value proposition itself and the unofficial interview represent the back-stage region. Here, due to a no socially framed context company and participants feel to free to present their own nature.

In light of the results presented in the previous chapter, customers and guests, online users and focus group participants reported a double behavior: one more suitable to the front-stage region of a tourist context, and second one more decontextualized. The tourist behavior is represented by the interaction with tables and chairs, staff and facilities, while the indirect one with pieces of art, painting, and statues is considered to be the non-tourist conduct. Nevertheless, the focus group presented a front- and back-stage dimension: during the official focus group, all members report to research an extra value in elements such as price-quality ratio, cleanliness and, location. On the contrary, during the informal conversation participants were no longer judging a tourist context rather than their mere experiences. Outside the tourist context, other elements such as the setting and the furniture, the decoration and the ornament were mentioned as an added value of a hotel. In the document analysis of the present research, the back-stage region was not detected due to the impossibility to contact the users in a non-tourist context.

6 Conclusions

The present study was designed to investigate the value co-creation in art hotel contexts. Through a wide literature review and the appropriate research methods, the research discussed the customers' perception of artworks as well as the engagement in the value co-creation process. The research tried also to identify how the value co-creation occurs and how the resources of suppliers and customers integrate each other while co-creating.

First of all, the topic revealed to be interesting as well as unexplored and the *multidisciplinarity* of the tourist field offers the opportunity to investigate it from different perspectives. Within the present research, the servicescape theory and the value co-creation one were employed to build the theoretical basis; then, a further analysis through Goffman's social models was considered useful to widely evaluate customers' behaviors within the hospitality industry. This latter aspect is thought particularly profitable because of the innovative trend of the *hotellerie* sector to innovate and reshape the original room-rental service. The competitiveness of the market requires a proactive approach: every change in terms of business strategy affects also the social asset in terms of behavioral expectations and obligations.

As a first consideration, according to the previous literature, the present research confirmed that the physical environment affects individuals' behaviors and nonverbal communication. Furthermore, the data collected indicated how the presence of pieces of art – even if not properly integrated into the setting – is perceived by customers and guests that interact with them.

Secondly, the study investigated the nature of the resources that suppliers and customers should have to take part in the value co-creation process. In case of an incomplete value proposition, as in the present research, the individual resources become crucial to complete the supplier's value proposition.

As a final consideration, the investigation of this phenomenon also from the social point of view offered a clear picture concerning the importance of a proper implementation of the *value proposition* in the physical setting. The present research reported how a clear and well-defined social context could affect the value co-creation process. The individual's awareness of a given setting and audience could facilitate or comprise the value co-creation because of the social pressure.

Besides, it is essential to determine socially given behavioral expectations and also to properly contextualize the value co-creation.

Finally, according to the empirical data collected in the present research, the presentation of the self and the tangibilization of the value proposition could lead towards different kinds of value, also different from the expected one.

As a result, a well-defined physical context determines how customer perceive and relate to the value proposition and also how they contextualize the added value of a given service provider. To conclude, a harmonious and well-integrated presence of pieces of art in a hotel contributes to reshape the physical setting and the social context of a hotel experience. The added value suggested in the literature has proved to occur just in the case of a complete tangibilization of

the value proposition from the supplier side. The present research suggested that in case of an incomplete translation into practice of the value advanced, the value co-creation process is determined by each customer according to the resources in his/her possession.

6.1 Further research

Based on the present study, additional research is recommended to improve the understanding of how customers can co-create value with and within a hotel context. Given the popularity of defining specific hotel genres, the co-creation of value could be different and specific according to each genre; thus, appropriate research could be beneficial to the hospitality industry itself.

Further research might also concern other aspects of art hotels or different hotel genres. In the case of art hotels, the engagement of the actual customers as well as of the staff of a specific case study could be beneficial to the data collection process. A comparable research would provide not generalizable data, but it could help in identifying step by step the most appropriate procedure to properly integrate artworks in a hotel. As per the present case study, the mere presence of pieces of art does not define the hotel nor facilitate the value co-creation.

At the same time, the opportunity to investigate the value co-creation within other hotel genres could clarify those specific experiences, but also create a wider and more general awareness about the value co-creation in the hotel industry.

6.2 Managerial implications

In terms of managerial implications, a clear understanding of the value co-creation phenomenon in the hotel context could lead to a proper competitive advantage. The present case study disclosed the importance of a clear *value proposition* and *presentation of the self* to properly engage customers. If customers take part in the value co-creation process as intended by the company, a complete value co-creation could occur, and an added value could be recognized to the hotel. For this to happen, besides the harmonious integration of the pieces of art in the hotel itself, it is important to socially reframe the context. Hotels should provide a clear and coherent *presentation of the self*, involve the staff as well as the customers in the new dimension of the hotel setting, and encourage new social dynamics closer to an art gallery rather than to a hotel. At the same time, artistic emphasis should not compromise the other services offered by a hotel, both aspects should be balanced within an ambidextrous approach.

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8 Appendix

8.1 Privacy Policy

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Welcome to this Focus Group.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this focus group. It is part of an academic research conducted as conclusive project of the Master of Science in Service Management - Tourism at Lund University (S).

The topic of the present research is the customer's perception of the physical environment of hotel lobbies. The research aims to understand how customer perceive the spatial design and the furniture of one the most important common area of a hotel. The present research aims to integrate the environmental component of a given area with the value that a customer can (co)-create within that specific context. To reach the above presented academic aim the present focus group will cover different topics, you will guide in the discussion through generic questions, but feel free to add any consideration.

Few photos form unknown hotels will be presented to you and you are kindly asked to discuss about them with the other participants. Please note that if for any reason you are able to recognize one of more hotels, do to not share this information with others.

Taking part at the present research will guarantee you anonymity, your identity or any identification element will not be reported in the research or public revealed.

Please note that the conversation will be recorded but the recording and its transcript will not be published and used outside from the academic aim of the present research.

If required, further information would be provided.

Thank you for your collaboration.

Silvia Bartoloni

Florence, 14th April 2019

8.2 Photos selection

8.2.1 Villa San Michele



1 Villa San Michele - The Bar in the old cloister



1 Villa San Michele - The core of the lobby in the old and bigger cloister



3 Villa San Michele - The Waiting Room in the Church



4 Villa San Michele - The Front Desk



5 Villa San Michele - The Waiting Room in the Church

8.2.2 Castello di Casole



2 Castello di Casole - The Living Room, the core of the lobby



3 Castello di Casole - The Living Room, the core of the lobby



4 Castello di Casole - The Front Desk and the Concierge



5 Castello di Casole - The Bar



6 Castello di Casole - The Bar

8.3 Interview guidelines

Topic one: travels, hotels and reviews

	<u>Couple 1</u>	<u>Couple 2</u>	<u>Couple 3</u>
Attitude in travelling			
Attitude in booking a trip, especially an accommodation			
Attitude in reading or looking for other customers' experiences			
Attitude in reading specifically online reviews			

Topic two: comments on the photos

	<u>Couple 1</u>	<u>Couple 2</u>	<u>Couple 3</u>
First impressions			
Focus on furniture and decorations			
Interest in eventual interactions with furniture, decoration, and staff			
Eventual further comments on the spatial dimension			