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# Exploring how interaction leads to value co-creation, value co-destruction, and value no-creation during service mega-disruptions

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the principles and the factors influencing interaction for resource integration during service mega-disruptions (SMDs) in the tourism ecosystem. Utilizing qualitative data from semi-structured interviews conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article reveals that interaction principles of willingness to exchange, access to information, dialogue, transparency, coordination, adaptation, and informed risk assessment lead to value co-creation (VCC). Failure to follow these principles leads to value no-creation (VNC) or value co-destruction (VCD). During SMDs, the most critical factors influencing interaction for resource integration are traveller's safety needs, initiation of travel cancellation, sympathy, proactivity, omnichannel communication, the effectiveness of technology and employees as well as the number of involved actors. Forced indifference in VNC is uncovered, where firms' constraints hinder their engagement despite tourists' desire for interaction. This study contributes to the understanding of value dynamics during SMDs and calls for further exploration of multiple stakeholders' perspectives in such contexts.

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Service mega-disruptions; value co-creation; value co-destruction; value no-creation; interaction; omnichannel communication

## 1. Introduction

The tourism industry is highly vulnerable to crises, including the COVID-19 outbreak, resulting in extensive travel cancellations and disruptions (Hall, 2010; Neuburger & Egger, 2021). Pandemics, such as COVID-19, cause service mega-disruptions (SMDs) in the tourism ecosystem, leading to challenges and uncertainties for tourists (Kabadayi et al., 2020).

Effective interaction for resource integration during SMDs is critical due to the contagion effects of travel plan changes caused by emergency conditions, fear, and frustration (Kabadayi et al., 2020). Unlike other services, tourists feel more vulnerable as they travel to distant destinations (Buhalis et al., 2019). Tourist vulnerability is exacerbated during SMDs due to constant changes, misinformation, and uncertainty (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2022). The well-being of stakeholders in the tourism

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ecosystem is at great risk, necessitating increased interaction for value co-creation (VCC) and avoiding value co-destruction (VCD) and value no-creation (VNC) (Sthapit & Jiménez-Barreto, 2019).

Empirical investigations of tourists' interaction challenges during SMDs remain sparse within the literature. While existing studies primarily examine aspects like hoteliers' preparedness and corporate social responsibility during SMDs (Ou et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021), limited attention is given to the intricacies of interactional VCC, VCD, during SMDs, especially in terms of co-recovery (e.g. Assiouras et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2021; Sthapit et al., 2022), and VNC. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the tourism ecosystem, characterized as an SMD, presents a distinctive context for probing resource integration and interaction challenges due to its intricate crisis nature, ambiguous responsibilities, and profound stakeholder repercussions (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022).

This study investigates tourists' interaction challenges during SMDs through interviews with tourists who have experienced COVID-19-related travel plan disruptions. VCC is closely linked with the service-dominant logic (S-D logic), which is metaphorically intricate and therefore challenging to adopt in empirical studies (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Thus, our study's theoretical foundation hinges on Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) DART model, encompassing dialogue, information access, risk assessment, and transparency. Additionally, we adopt Makkonen and Olkkonen's (2017) concept that interactions involve exchange, adaptation, coordination, and communication. By scrutinizing instances where these principles fall short, our aim is to enhance the dynamics of the DART model and explore its interplay with VCD and VNC (Makkonen & Olkkonen, 2017).

This study contributes to the tourism literature on SMDs by enhancing our understanding of the factors that drive the need for interaction and the characteristics of successful interactions during these periods. Moreover, it extends our knowledge of the role of interaction in generating not only VCC but also VCD and VNC.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. SMDs and VCC

Kabadayi et al. (2020) conceptualize SMDs as 'unforeseen service market disturbances caused by a pandemic [which] occur on a massive scale affecting multiple stakeholders and service ecosystems simultaneously which cannot be easily recovered from' (p. 810). Therefore, the difference between a regular service disruption and an SMD is that an SMD affects entire service ecosystems, while a regular disruption occurs on a micro-level. SMDs affect the dynamics of the value creation processes (VCC, VCD, and VNC). Government actions and policies, such as travel bans and lockdowns, disrupt service ecosystems leading to disruption of demand in the tourism ecosystem (Kabadayi et al., 2020).

Service-dominant logic (S-D logic) explains how VCC happens at different levels, such as individual and societal (Vargo et al., 2020). VCC refers to a resource integration process in which all the actors involved in the process use resources and turn them into value (Sthapit & Björk, 2020). However, the VCC process can be rather disharmonious and chaotic at times (Fisher & Smith, 2011), particularly during SMDs. VCD is the 'interactional process between service systems that results in a decline in at least one of the systems' well-being' (Plé & Chumpitaz Cácaras, 2010, p. 431). To balance the dichotomy of VCD and VCC, Makkonen and Olkkonen (2017) introduced VNC which is when there is an 'indifference to the actor perceived value outcome' (p. 518). Research on VNC is in general scarce, but there are some notable exceptions found in the tourism literature (see Sthapit, 2019; Sthapit & Björk, 2020).

### 2.2. The role of interaction in VCC during SMDs

S-D logic recognizes that VCC is an interactional collaborative process where reciprocal communication and knowledge sharing between actors is fundamental (Assiouras et al., 2023). SMDs disrupt tourists' plans not only because they cannot travel anymore (e.g. travel bans) but also because their safety

needs (informational, physical, financial, and emotional) are changed (Berry et al., 2020). During SMDs, actors of the tourism ecosystem reevaluate their resources and how to turn them into value (Assiouras et al., 2022). The risk of VCD and VNC is high during SMDs, so the need for effective interaction is increased (Sharples et al., 2022). Interconnectedness, agility, and realignment of practices protect system viability and resilience (Assiouras et al., 2022; Bethune et al., 2022) by facilitating firms and tourists to find better solutions to their disrupted travel plans and thus VCC.

The importance of actors' abilities to activate co-creative processes has been highlighted as a fundamental precondition for VCC within the S-D logic approach (Vargo et al., 2020). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) emphasise interaction and how this facilitates VCC by pointing out dialogue, access to information, risk assessment, and transparency (DART) as building blocks. To realize VCC, there needs to be a dialogue around issues of interest to all actors, the actors need to be equal, and joint problem solvers (Williams et al., 2015). Hence, actors should have access to information to be able to make an assessment (risk versus benefits) of their actions and decisions. In our study, we have adopted Prahalad and Ramaswamy's DART model (2004) as a basis for our theoretical framework. Some adjustments are made by acknowledging that interaction not only leads to VCC but can also result in VCD and VNC (Makkonen & Olkkonen, 2017).

### **2.3. The role of dialogue during SMDs**

Dialogue *'require[s] deep engagement, lively interactivity, empathetic understanding, and a willingness by both parties to act, especially when they're at odds'* (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2002, p. 10). During SMDs, upheavals in firms' practices and customers' needs lead to increased information asymmetry that risks disrupting VCC. Dialogue helps actors to identify more personalized solutions by facilitating knowledge sharing, learning, adaptation, coordination, and decreasing conventional information asymmetry (Seeger, 2006). In that way, the interaction episodes successfully lead to equitable exchanges and long-term trustworthy relationships (Makkonen & Olkkonen, 2017). However, there is a risk that dialogue can lead to cognitive dissonance, cynicism, and distrust, especially when dialogue is perceived as instrumentally and superficially employed (Crane & Livesey, 2003).

### **2.4. Access to information during SMDs**

Consumers must access immediate and timely information (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In the age of the 'crisis of immediacy', consumers expect to get content, expertise, and personalized solutions in real-time (Bethune et al., 2022). Tourists are likely to switch between channels (Capriello & Riboldazzi, 2020). The responsibility of firms is not limited to offering a multichannel approach for interaction, with little or no integration (e.g. social media chats). Firms should adopt an omnichannel approach integrating all channels, thus offering a seamless experience (Buhalis et al., 2020).

SMDs increase the need for accurate and timely information (Bethune et al., 2022). Additionally, tourists aim to find information and emotional support by using any available platform of communication with the firm (Yu et al., 2021). Tourists with the right information at the right time feel safer (Chemli et al., 2022), leading to more willingness to exchange, fewer travel cancellations, and improved revisit intentions (Yu et al., 2021).

### **2.5. Transparency during SMDs**

Transparency is a necessary condition of effective dialogue (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Transparency is defined as the open flow of information amongst stakeholders to decrease information asymmetry (Holzner & Holzner, 2006). When service systems are disrupted, transparency contributes to greater perceived organizational credibility, policy predictability, perceived employee effort, service quality, and positive behavioural intentions (Merlo et al., 2018). For instance, during SMDs tourism firms should be open about the potential risks and problems related to compensations.

Signalling theory suggests that transparency is a strong signal of a firm's goodwill (Merlo et al., 2018). However, during service disruptions, there are concerns that transparency can raise uncertainty and have legal consequences (Seeger, 2006).

## **2.6. Risk assessment during SMDs**

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argue that successful communication and dialogue are characterized by risk assessment. Transparency should enable actors' sense-making of benefits and risks and not only be plain information disclosure (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). During SMDs, actors feel more vulnerable and aim to adapt to complex situations (Buhalis et al., 2019). Information should be carefully balanced in terms of quality and quantity to facilitate an effective risk assessment (Bethune et al., 2022). Customers should feel empowered and share responsibility in the VCC process by establishing an appropriate level of expectations, building trustworthy relationships, and decreasing an overestimation of costs in comparison to benefits (Merlo et al., 2018). The use of simple language and targeted personalized messages based on the actors' level of risk and efficiency are necessary for effective risk assessment, resulting in an increased willingness to exchange (Liu-Lastres et al., 2019). Otherwise, consumer fatigue and a lowering of sense-making capabilities will increase uncertainty, confusion, and panic (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014) leading to VCD or VNC.

## **3. Methods**

This study aims to explore and understand tourists' challenges during SMDs. It adopts an interpretative constructivist approach since it is assumed that humans construct meaning-making through their experience of the world (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). In-depth semi-structured interviews were used as they can generate rich data while ensuring a thematic focus and structure. Interviews allowed the researchers to explore new angles, supporting the explorative approach (Alvesson, 2011). Semi-interview interviews provided more in-depth knowledge and insights about tourists' experiences of challenges related to SMDs.

### **3.1. Sample and data collection**

Purposive snowball sampling was used to reach individuals who had experienced COVID-19-related travel cancellations. The varied backgrounds of interviewees in this study ensured the validity of the qualitative data collected (Jordan & Moore, 2018). The final sample of interviewees included 20 females and 17 males resulting in 37 interviewees in total (see Appendix 1). Once theoretical saturation (that point in time when it is not possible to distinguish any new insights from the interviews) occurred (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017), the data collection was halted which is the reason for this specific number of interviewees. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online, via Skype or Zoom, during the COVID-19 pandemic (between March and May 2020) and were recorded in audio and video. The interviews ranged from 45 min to 70 min and the transcription consisted of 287 pages.

### **3.2. Analysis**

Before starting coding, the authors familiarize themselves with the data by reading through the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The collected data were analyzed by three authors who read and coded the material independently. The study's aim functioned as a common point of reference and guidance for the analysis. The coding procedure was influenced by grounded theory which advocates three steps of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding involves creating simple shortcodes, axial coding refers to categorizing the open codes, and selective coding involves relating the axial codes to descriptions of the studied phenomenon. This approach was chosen because it allowed the development of categories but also identified relationships between

these categories (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997). Braun and Clarke (2006) view this as a 'lite' version of grounded theory since it is akin to thematic analysis and because the authors do not subscribe to the theoretical commitments that come with an 'orthodox' application of grounded theory.

Table 1 provides an overview of the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes developed during the analysis. The coding started with open coding which was the process of constructing short and simple codes by moving quickly, yet carefully, through the data (Charmaz, 2006). The next step was axial coding which was the process of relating the categories identified during the open coding. The third and final step was selective coding which was the process of putting the relations between the axial codes into rich descriptions of the focal phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Two independent researchers checked the coding.

## 4. Findings

Several interaction challenges during the SMD were identified, based on data analysis. The open and axial codes have been aggregated into three selective codes: (a) getting in contact, (b) getting the right information, and (c) getting the right solution (see Table 1).

### 4.1. Getting in contact

During the COVID-19 SMD, participants faced challenges in communicating with tourism firms. Lock-downs disrupted normal working patterns, and firms had to implement technology and remote work processes, resulting in reduced operational capacity. This coincided with increased demand for services, causing extremely long waiting times for contacting firms, leading to tourist annoyance. Some tourists, particularly those with lower safety needs, chose to abandon services rather than wait for hours being on hold with call centres. The difficulty in contacting firms resulted in a non-integration of resources among actors, leading to VNC if tourists were indifferent or unwilling to invest more resources (e.g. time) (Makkonen & Olkkonen, 2017).

*"I wasn't waiting for the money ... or calling the company to return my money because I do know that companies are very slow" – Participant 7*

Access to contextually adequate, timely, and updated information is crucial for VCC (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Failure by firms to interact in a timely manner resulted in VCD, as tourists experienced negative emotions, carelessness, and missed opportunities for adaptive solutions to travel cancellations. Real-time responses are critical for VCC and resilience (Bethune et al., 2022).

Participants were critical of tourism firms' preparedness, agility, and willingness to allocate additional resources, such as more employees, to provide information and assistance (Kabadayi et al., 2020). Particularly, participants with non-flexible/refundable reservations with airlines felt that they faced numerous obstacles and that firms failed to address their needs, leaving them stranded and stressed.

*"So, yeah, in this situation, I was really pushy and ... I cannot say mad, it's just like confusion because I was there and could not get home. It was desperate times." – Participant 36*

Participants with urgent travel needs and costly bookings faced pressing issues with contacting firms. The urgency for travel necessitated immediate access to information, meaningful dialogue, and comprehensive risk assessment; otherwise, VCD emerged. However, this was often impossible, especially with airlines due to inefficient communication infrastructure and a low willingness to engage effectively with customers, resulting in VCD.

*"It was really difficult to get a hold of anybody." – Participant 1.*

Participants also criticized customer service phone lines and automated chatbots, which supports Čaić et al. (2018) that VCD occurs when actors are replaced and disengaged.

**Table 1.** Open, axial, and selective codes developed during the analysis.

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The website is old</li> <li>Talking to robots</li> <li>Lack of customer service employees</li> <li>Firms in different countries (hard or costly to communicate)</li> <li>Difficult to contact travel agents because of restrictions (physical stores are closed)</li> <li>Long waiting time to get in contact with customer service (e.g. calls, emails)</li> <li>The difficulty to communicate was intentional to delay refunds (consumers' scepticism)</li> </ul>	<p>Insufficient capacity to provide access to information or/and unwillingness to interact/exchange (mainly leads to VCD for tourists with high safety needs and VNC for tourists with low safety needs)</p>	<p>Getting in contact</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gold members are prioritized</li> <li>Use a friend's gold member card to be prioritized</li> <li>Business customers are prioritized</li> <li>Understanding that customers with imminent departure dates are prioritized</li> </ul>	<p>Priority should be given to customers with high safety needs (mainly leads to VCC)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use different media (e.g. phone, social media, chat, email) with more or less success sometimes</li> <li>Call the travel agent or the supplier directly</li> <li>Go to the airport to find an employee</li> </ul>	<p>Customer with high safety needs to use more channels if the first interaction is not successful. Multichannel &amp; Omnichannel Communication (lead to VCC if the information is clear and consistent but risk resulting in VCD if the channels are not well integrated, i.e. a lack of an omnichannel approach.)</p> <p>Sympathy (mainly leads to VCC)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding that the waiting time is longer than normal because of the pandemic</li> <li>Understanding that customer service employees are in a difficult situation</li> <li>If tourists' safety needs are low they don't call customer service to avoid stressing frontline employees</li> <li>Employees are working from home and cannot perform like they normally would</li> <li>Previous successful interactions and relationship with the firm generate more sympathy and patience.</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cancelling flights on short notice (low proactivity)</li> <li>No follow-up interaction</li> <li>Would like to get updates to demonstrate more understanding/sympathy</li> <li>Not clear how to apply for a refund or other preferable solutions (low transparency)</li> </ul>	<p>Lack of information (mainly leads to VCD)</p>	<p>Getting the right information</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ineffective interaction with contradictory emails (low coordination)</li> <li>Customer service employees suggest different things (low coordination)</li> <li>Travel agents suggest one thing while airlines provide other solutions or give different advice (low coordination)</li> <li>Rules and policies are unclear (low transparency and low risk assessment)</li> <li>Looking on social media for information leads to information overload and confusion (low risk assessment). Sometimes consumers get good advice from peers on social media</li> </ul>	<p>Confusing information (mainly leads to VCD)</p>	

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** Continued.

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid social media and prefer to speak to friends to avoid confusion</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accept being refunded and then it is denied by the firm (low coordination, low transparency)</li> <li>• Reject to refund but after several weeks or months, firms accept to refund (adaptation but usually too late). VNC for tourists with low safety needs.</li> <li>• Pressured to accept the firm's favoured solution generating low-risk assessment for the tourists (e.g. voucher or reschedule)</li> </ul>	Dishonesty and inconsistency (mainly lead to VCD)	Getting the right Solution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty interacting effectively when tourists have non-flexible/refundable reservations</li> <li>• Expect personalized interactions</li> <li>• Want to discuss and negotiate to find a solution</li> <li>• Want additional solution choices (e.g. not only a voucher or rebooking)</li> </ul>	No room for dialogue and adaptation (mainly leads to VCD or VNC)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees give advice that helps customers to take the right decision</li> <li>• Speak with a specific employee that has provided good solutions in the past (previous successful interactions)</li> <li>• The solution is facilitated by travel agents (e.g. Airbnb)</li> </ul>	Help from other actors in the tourism ecosystem for instance firms' employees, travel platforms/agents (mainly leads to VCC)	

*"It was very difficult to find somebody who could cancel my ticket. [...] So, it is because you are talking with the robot."* – Participant 24.

SMDs posed challenges for automated services as they struggled to handle unstructured requests and distressed tourists' unpredictable demands, leading to VCD. Automated communication systems need to understand dynamic data and a reality that demands everchanging travel plans (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). As a failure to do so may result in tourists giving up on interacting with firms (VNC) if they are only met with (ro)bots (Makkonen & Olkkonen, 2017).

SMDs add turbulence and complexity to tourism which in itself already is 'hostile' to unfamiliar destinations (Buhalis et al., 2019), amplifying anxiety and vulnerability among tourists. Various communication channels, including face-to-face, telephone conversations, email, and social media are used by tourists to engage with firms (Buhalis, 2020). The expectation is that for these channels to be integrated through an omnichannel approach that offers consistency, flexibility, personalization, and convenience in communication (Mishra et al., 2021).

*"I felt a lot better after we had the face-to-face contact with the customer service manager at the airport."* – Participant 28

Even without reaching a solution, he felt better by the interaction and finally being comprehend the different options during this turbulent time (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Face-to-face interaction with employees can fulfil customers' needs for trust, self-enhancement, and understanding meeting the need for emotional, financial, and information safety requirements (Berry et al., 2020). Such interactions enable adequate risk assessment and help avoid VCD.

Unlike larger firms, small tourism firms maintained their communication infrastructure during the SMD, enabling access to information and meaningful dialogue due to the smaller volume of calls,



emails, and cancellations. For example, small independent hotels and local tour operators demonstrated better communication abilities. Participants highlighted their positive experiences with firms that exhibited understanding, flexibility, and frequent communication. This fostered trust and had an impact on VCC.

*"They said, 'whatever happens, you will get the money back.' (...) I think how firms respond is important. So how you communicate is important. The frequency of communication is important." – Participant 29*

Participants who booked through online travel agents (OTAs) faced difficulties communicating with them, as the OTAs themselves struggled to contact airlines for customer assistance.

*"There was talk about the airlines not responding, but in fact, it is the travel agent, [...] the frustration, anger, and my wife have the same feeling. We could still survive the loss of the money, but there was no contact. No consideration of us as a customer." – Participant 19.*

However, exceptions were seen with OTAs such as 'Booking.com' and AirBnB which implemented SMD-related policies, offering refunds even for non-refundable bookings. These OTAs avoided breakdowns due to fewer cancellation requests and gained participants' trust, which is crucial for future VCC.

*"The Airbnb that we booked was not a problem. Even though the 'free' cancellation date was over, we simply explained our situation and it was alright." – Participant 33.*

Tourism firms that were previously perceived to have excellent customer service fell short in effective risk assessment and meaningful dialogues during the SMD. For instance, Expedia.com and Hotels.com applied rigid pre-SMD rules for reservations, showing reactive rather than proactive behaviour.

*"Now we have to wait [to see what happens with the hotel bookings]. We have to ask higher up." – Participant 28.*

Participants demonstrated a sense of co-suffering and expressed understanding and sympathy towards the challenges faced by firms and their employees in customer service. They recognized the difficult circumstances, such as remote working and handling numerous complex requests, and acknowledged the overwhelming workload faced by customer service representatives. Participants showed empathy by avoiding unnecessary contact with tourism firms, being polite and understanding when communicating with them, or wanting priority given to those tourists who had sooner departure dates or were far away from home. Participants with a broader understanding and experience of the tourism ecosystem demonstrated more sympathy towards tourism firms' failure to communicate with them leading to less VCD and VNC. This aligns with previous studies suggesting that it is easier to express sympathy towards individuals than firms (Baker & Kim, 2018).

*"I said, look, you are probably overworked due to all the complaints. I know it is not your fault. I know if I shouted at you, it is not going to make any difference, but I would like an answer. And the woman at the end of the line said, "it is really nice to speak to somebody who is not shouting at me. Hang on. I will see what I can do." I am fairly calm about it because I know things will get settled sooner or later." – Participant 14*

Sympathy towards other actors in the tourism ecosystem is crucial for promoting cooperative behaviours, solidarity, and building strong relationships (Murphy & Laczniak, 2018), particularly during SMDs characterized by strong interdependence. Johnson and Buhalis (2022) demonstrated how travellers developed solidarity networks during crises to support those in need.

#### **4.2. Getting the right information**

Tourists felt they were not adequately informed and updated about refund processes, particularly regarding their flights. This lack of immediate and timely information hinders meaningful dialogues (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). During uncertainty, consumers' experiences are inextricably linked to the provision and foresight of emotional, financial, and information safety (Berry et al., 2020; Bethune et al., 2022).

*"The communication was not the best with them because they were cancelling flights and the communication was quite "short" [...] I have not received any emails from Ryanair yet about my cancellation because I asked for a refund, but still, I do not have any email that confirms the cancellation."* – Participant 4

The participant expected tourism firms to take a proactive approach to their communication, providing regular updates to keep tourists informed. Effective complaint handling and service recovery should involve both reactive approaches (monitoring reviews and responding to complaints) and proactive approaches (gathering important and relevant information) (Merlo et al., 2018). By adopting a proactive approach, tourism firms can help tourists assess risks, thus generating more sympathy towards them.

*"If the company is very passive and does not do anything, that will piss me off. But if the company shows, you know, that they do at least try to communicate and keep you updated and so on as a passenger, then you know, I will be more understanding."* – Participant 3

However, when the tourism firms attempted to inform tourists through various channels, such as emails, phone calls, texts, or social media, the information provided was often contradictory or vague. Excessive but unreliable information that constantly changed created confusion and hindered risk assessment, resulting in VCD or VNC. Misalignment or misuse of resources and practices between actors in the ecosystem can contribute to VCD (Assiouras et al., 2022).

*"We have lots of emails. And all these emails are not that clear. So the information in these emails was confusing. Full of information and full of excuses from their company but not with any practical action."* – Participant 26

The participants' confusion was not solely due to the rapidly changing circumstances during the SMD. Firms, particularly airlines, were reluctant to engage in communication that would confirm or expedite refund processes, as it would negatively impact their liquidity and survival. Participants found it confusing having to contact firms through different channels and encounter contradicting information. Effective risk assessment depends not only on accessibility and disclosure but also on appropriate sense-making by various actors in the ecosystem (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). During this SMD, the failure of multichannel communication was evident in the lack of specific and personalized responses for disrupted travel plans, highlighting the potential benefits of an omnichannel communication approach.

*"So, no one knew what was to be done or not ... unprofessional. One employee saying something and the other the opposite."* – Participant 11

Difficulty in reaching tourism firms led participants to social media in search of information. However, some participants who used social media felt overwhelmed and confused due to the abundance of conflicting information (Yu et al., 2021).

*"I am also in a travel group on Facebook called Girls Love Travel. And that is all they talk about. Everyone has different experiences and kind of getting their suggestions and advice for how they are able to get a refund."* – Participant 1

The inaccessibility of trustworthy and up-to-date information undermines tourists' risk assessment and fails to protect emotional, financial, and information safety (Berry et al., 2020), resulting in VCD. Employing an omnichannel communication strategy would have facilitated clarity and VCC, preventing frustration and VCD. As previously mentioned, the desperation of being forced to use multiple channels often led to confusion. This was particularly common when interacting with OTAs.

*"... it's a little bit confusing when most airlines and the agent are sending you kind of same emails. And whom do you respond to?"* – Participant 36

During the SMD, heavy users of social media relied on these platforms even more than usual, aiming to increase DART and avoid VCD. In contrast, participants sceptical of social media avoided the platforms due to a fearing of VCD (e.g. wasting time, getting even more stressed).

### 4.3. Getting the right solution

Participants did not face any issues when cancelling flexible and refundable bookings. They used the websites of tourism firms (e.g. airlines, car rental, hotels), OTAs (e.g. Booking.com), or contacted local travel agents (TAs).

Tourism firms provided various solutions for cancelled travel plans, including credit vouchers, refunds, or rescheduling. However, rescheduling often held little value due to the uncertain situation (e.g. still risking quarantine when arriving at the destination), leaving participants dissatisfied with the lack of solutions.

*"They gave me only two choices, going in August [2020] or 2021. A refund was not discussed." – Participant 34*

Vouchers were better received, although uncertainty had a negative impact on their attractiveness. Travel firms tried to adapt to the new dynamics of the tourism ecosystem, but still ended up with VCD. Participants felt that tourism firms prioritized cost-saving measures, such as offering vouchers instead of refunds, while tourists, fuelled by uncertainty, sought alternative solutions. The findings suggest that the need for a transparent and interactive dialogue is an effective strategy for facilitating VCC during SMDs.

However, tourism firms primarily engaged in one-way information sharing to control interactions, disappointing participants who desired dialogue. Simply put, tourism firms adopted a mode of plain information disclosure approach (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). This approach, coupled with persuasive or aggressive messaging to influence choices and discourage refund applications eroded trust and generated frustration and anger among tourists, resulting in VCD.

*"Why can they not process the refunds now? You must think about that. About cashflows, I suppose, as a business or I wouldn't like to be in that situation. But you. You should be talking to your customer." – Participant 19*

The findings suggest differences in how low-cost airlines and national carriers communicate cancellation solutions. Low-cost airlines were quicker in offering solutions that led to less VCD. However, there were still complications and tactics to promote vouchers. For example, Ryanair made the refund process complicated and sent pushy emails trying to force tourists to accept vouchers. Wizz Air had a straightforward refund procedure, but systematically cancelled flights with short notice, resulting in VCD. National carriers, including their low-cost subsidiaries such as Vueling, adopted similar strategies that hindered refund applications.

*"I am not satisfied because I don't like that they insist on the voucher, Come on. I said that I like to get a refund. Why am I rechallenge with that? Not only this. You know, I clicked on the Website because they say that you must click on the link if you want to have the refund. And then again, it talks about the voucher. Well, come on. No, I'm not satisfied with this." – Participant 16*

Reputation and trust played crucial roles with participants more inclined to communicate with national carriers based on perceived reliability.

Some participants advocated honesty and transparency from tourism firms so they could help them by accepting a voucher or rescheduling. Moreover, if firms are transparent about their difficulties and the risks associated with various solutions it is perceived as goodwill, leading to reciprocity and VCC (Murphy & Laczniak, 2018).

*"And they are not quite transparent about how they are doing. They are almost bankrupt because of this COVID. I read this on the news. Why don't they tell me that so I can help them." – Participant 1.*

Participants also experienced instances of helpful employees guiding them with risk assessment and toward advantageous solutions and thus, facilitating VCC.

*"The customer service representative was very friendly, but she explained that based on the current firm's policies I cannot get a refund or a voucher if I cancel my booking. In a rather honest way, she advised me to wait because many flights would be cancelled, or their departure time would be changed. If that happens, I could get a*

*voucher. I appreciated that honesty but obviously, it wasn't the best solution. Finally, the time of departure was changed, and I got a voucher" – Participant 34.*

Proactive participants, who adjusted or cancelled their plans even before the COVID-19 disruptions, faced VCD due to unresponsive firms and cancellation fees. The firms were more reactive than proactive and were not willing to adjust or cancel bookings before it was a must.

*"Especially for paying more for the change ... I wrote many emails, but they never answered. I got them on the phone once again after that but the employees at the calling centre were not informed of the necessary course of action to be taken and whether conditions would enable me to have a voucher for another flight that had a schedule change" – Participant 11*

Proactive tourism firms that provided clear updates and information decreased travellers' need to interact with customer services and the risk of VCD. Examples include Airbnb's feature for unforeseen circumstances (e.g. and SNCF's proactive approach of allowing free rebooking or cancellation).

*"So, Airbnb has a feature called something like. Let's say something like unforeseen circumstances, some option like that. And I said, OK, this looks interesting. So, I clicked it. I put my story and I got a full refund for all my Airbnbs" – Participant 15*

Meeting customers' emotional, financial, and information needs (Berry et al., 2020) enhanced risk assessment and VCC. Employees displaying sympathy toward customers promote an adaptive service experience (Wilder et al., 2014). This is important during SMDs because the interactions require agility and service transformation (Kabadayi et al., 2020). Using emotional intelligence and adopting an empathic approach foster reciprocity and enhance tourists' VCC intentions with the firms (Stoyanova-Bozhkova et al., 2022).

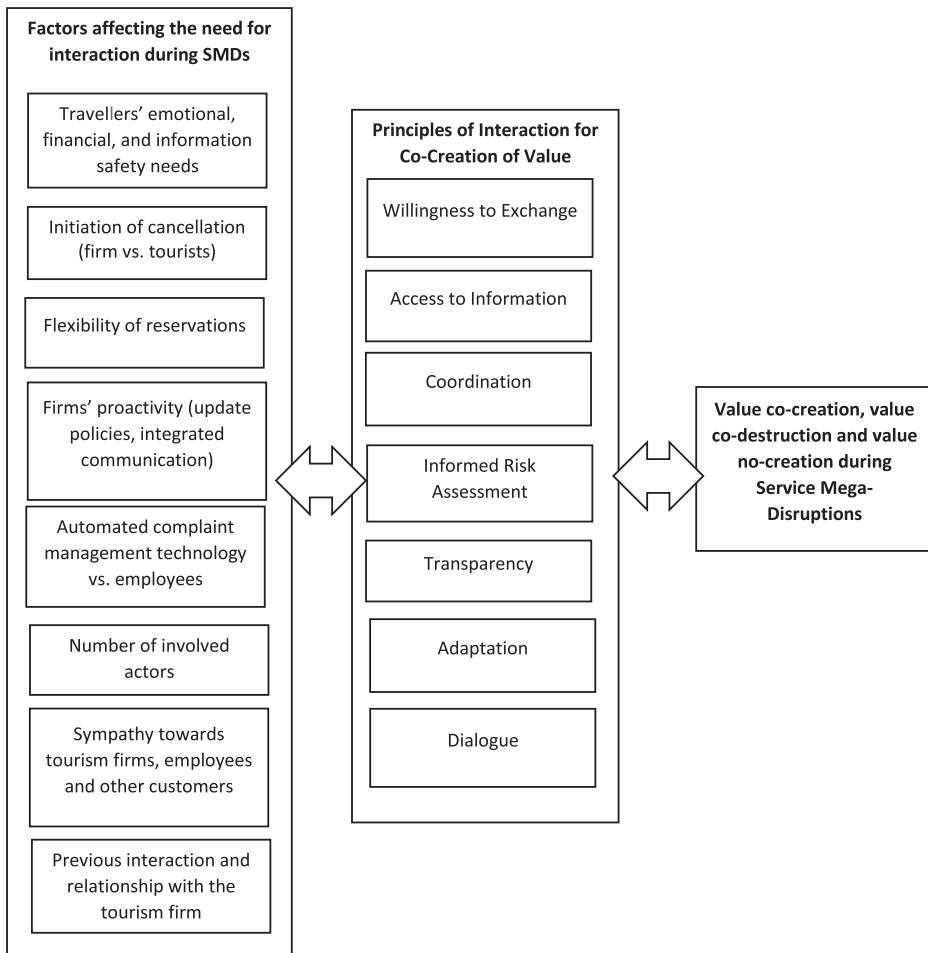
## 5. Discussion and conclusions

### 5.1. Conclusion

During SMDs, tourists encounter various challenges in interacting with tourism firms which can result in VCD or VNC. First, the volume of travel cancellations increases customers' need for interactions with tourism firms. Second, the limited proactive measures taken to introduce an SMD functional interaction system led to unsatisfactory interaction experiences characterized by reduced access to information, coordination, risk assessment, transparency, adaptation, coordination, and dialogue (see Figure 1). Sceptical tourists attribute these ineffective interactions to firms' reluctance to engage and communicate during SMDs, particularly in the case of airlines, certain OTAs, and a few hotels.

During SMDs, the necessity of interaction is influenced by various factors, including travellers' safety needs (informational, financial, physical, and emotional), the actor (firm or customer) initiating the travel, flexibility in travel reservations, firms' proactivity in developing an adaptive SMD interaction system, the number of involved actors, the level of sympathy towards tourism firms and their employees, and past interaction experiences and relationships with specific tourism firms or the industry as a whole (see Figure 1). These factors not only influence the demand for interaction but also the possible paths toward VCC, VCD, and VNC.

During SMDs, customer-initiated travel cancellations are primarily driven by customers' safety needs. Those with high safety needs aim to interact with tourism firms to cancel or modify their travel plans, thus avoiding VCD. For example, stressed customers with high emotional safety needs may desire to cancel their arrangements well in advance. Travellers who are away from home experience face the highest need for interaction. When customers have flexible reservations (e.g. refundable, rebookable without fees), they interact easily with tourism firms as they did before the SMD, typically without experiencing VCD. However, in the case of non-flexible reservations, customers with high safety needs encounter challenges and failed interactions (VCD) especially when tourism firms primarily adhere to pre-SMD interaction practices rather than implementing an SMD interaction system.



**Figure 1.** VCC, VCD and VNC during SMDs.

On the other hand, firm-initiated travel cancellations follow a slightly different interaction pattern for resource integration. The lack of proactivity from tourism firms in establishing SMD interaction systems becomes the main catalyst for escalating interaction episodes. Firms, especially airlines, that proactively cancel services and offer user-friendly, transparent, and adaptable methods of interaction (e.g. through websites) can bypass the need for multiple interaction episodes (e.g. chatbots, social media) and mitigate VCD. However, customer safety needs remain important in cases of firm-initiated cancellations. For instance, customers with financial safety needs, especially for expensive reservations, feel compelled to interact with tourism firms particularly when proposed solutions lead to VCD. Nevertheless, customers with a positive relationship and trust in a firm exhibit a reduced desire for interaction, especially those with moderate or low safety needs. They display patience and expect that a solution leading to VCC will be eventually reached.

In both firm and customer-initiated cancellations, travellers with high safety need to resort to multiple channels of communication due to failed interaction episodes. However, existing communication infrastructure and interaction practices (e.g. chatbots) are primarily designed for normal periods, resulting in additional failed interaction episodes. Dialogue and risk assessment prove ineffective, leading to increased VCD, even if favourable solutions (e.g. refunds) are eventually provided. For instance, customers with urgent travel needs can become trapped in a cycle of

cancellations and new bookings, incurring extra costs and emotional exhaustion. Customers with lower safety needs invest less effort in interacting with firms, often simply visiting websites or making a single phone call, displaying a more indifferent approach that leads to VNC.

Human interaction with employees becomes crucial in addressing consumer tensions arising due to SMDs. Dialogue emerges as a fundamental tool for effective problem-solving and VCC. Frontline employees play an increasingly important role in facilitating dialogue, adaptation, coordination, risk assessment, and problem-solving and, ultimately, VCC, in turbulent and complex environments.

The need for interaction increases with the involvement of multiple actors in the planned travels. However, a higher number of interactions often results in a greater likelihood of failed interaction episodes due to firms' low willingness to engage, poor coordination, and limited adaptation. For instance, reservations made through online travel agents require successful interaction between more than two actors, which may not be feasible during an SMD. Nevertheless, the presence of multiple actors does not always lead to VCD, especially when one of the actors implements an adaptive SMD interaction system that facilitates VCC. Our findings demonstrate how Airbnb and Booking.com enable interaction and VCC by offering user-friendly systems (e.g. special website sections) that allow free-of-charge changes and cancellations to their bookings during SMDs. Customers who booked through small TAs also experienced less VCD or VCC due to their long-standing trust-based relationships with them and since these TAs handled all the interactions with other tourism firms.

During SMDs, the effectiveness of interaction related to VCC is compromised. SMDs can evoke tourists' sympathy toward tourism firms and their employees, if organizations demonstrate honesty and transparency. To some extent, tourists understand the complexities and evolving nature of the situation, which makes it challenging to establish contact with tourism firms and obtain accurate information. Nonetheless, tourists' expectations for transparency and explanations from tourism firms increase as well. Our findings reveal that transparency during interactions can enhance tourists' sympathy. Unfortunately, many tourism firms become less transparent during SMDs (e.g. airlines, OTAs) to safeguard their short-term financial well-being. Tourists were unethically coerced into accepting unfavourable solutions such as rescheduled itineraries or credit vouchers, which failed to protect their emotional, financial, and information safety. Overall, tourists require strong signals of goodwill from tourism firms, and failure to provide such signals results in scepticism and diminished sympathy towards them.

## **5.2. Theoretical contribution**

This study contributes to the understanding of VCC, VCD, and VNC in the context of SMDs (Assiouras et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2021; Sthapit et al., 2022). The findings extend the literature to highlight the role of tourists' sympathy towards tourism firms and their employees during SMDs. Tourists' sympathy arises from the recognition that SMDs are complex and require collaboration among all involved actors to achieve VCC. Existing literature has limited research on consumer sympathy toward tourism firms and their employees (e.g. Baker & Kim, 2018) and this study expands on that discussion by incorporating perspectives from VCC literature that emphasise the role of sympathy and solidarity in fostering stronger relationships and value (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2022). However, our study also demonstrates that sympathy has its limits, which can be related to discomfort and the need for reciprocal sympathy from tourism firms (Prior & Marcos-Cuevas, 2016). Tourists expect tourism firms to not only respond to their requests but also exhibit a deep understanding of their emotional, financial, and information safety (Berry et al., 2020).

Additionally, this study sheds light on the role of omnichannel communication and information and communication (ICT) technology in VCC during SMDs. While omnichannel communication is well-known for its importance in successful retailing, it has received limited attention in complaint management (Miquel-Romero et al., 2020) and no attention at all in the context of SMDs. During SMDs, omnichannel communication can provide tourists with access to adequate, objective,

transparent, and timely information, enabling risk assessment and dialogue with tourism firms, ultimately leading to VCC. Furthermore, this study extends previous research on the role of technology as a facilitator of VCC (e.g. Čaić et al., 2018) by examining its impact in the context of SMDs. The findings emphasize that automated technology may lack adaptability, flexibility, and interactivity in complex and turbulent environments.

This study also relates to the concept of VNC (Makkonen & Olkonen, 2017; Sthapit, 2019; Sthapit & Björk, 2020), suggesting that indifference to value outcomes may be forced due to firms' constraints rather than a genuine lack of interest. The findings suggest that tourists desired interaction and resource integrations but were unable to do so due to the firms (airlines, OTAs) not engaging in the process. Tourism firms' apparent indifference may be a result of being on the verge of bankruptcy or having exhausted their resources, rather than a true indifference to value outcomes. VNC arguably occurred, but the tourism firms are probably not indifferent to their forced indifference. We, therefore, propose that the VNC concept should consider whether indifference is forced or not.

### **5.3. Practical implications**

In terms of practical implications, tourism firms should develop agility and emotional intelligence to ensure humanity and solidarity during SMDs (Johnson & Buhalis, 2022). They should provide tourists with adequate access to information and establish a transparent dialogue to find solutions to disrupted travel plans, facilitating VCC. Clear communication through an omnichannel strategy, delivering concise and up-to-date information, is critical for keeping customers well-informed.

To effectively use limited resources in disrupted contexts, a triage assessment system (TAS) can be employed, commonly used in the health industry (Moore & Bone, 2017). Tourism firms should prioritize tourists facing safety deficits, such as vulnerable travellers, those stranded away from home, or with imminent departures. Technology and employees play crucial roles in a TAS system. Technology supports processes and prioritization, while employees utilize emotional intelligence and agility to co-create mutually satisfactory solutions.

Enhancing resilience, crisis management, and effective responses, require the establishment of processes and systems for SMDs are necessary (Bethune et al., 2022). A specific system of interaction with a cross-organization and cross-ecosystem perspective should be established pre-SMDs, prioritizing tourists with the biggest safety needs. This system should proactively and reactively evaluate and prepare for possible disruptions, facilitate emergency services and responses during crises, mitigate impacts, and empower resilience in the aftermath. Designated websites, social media accounts, video calls, chat services, and contact phone lines should be established to facilitate the co-creation of mutually agreeable alternatives.

The study also highlights the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning in enabling an effective TAS system. These technologies can prioritize information sharing, determine appropriate platforms for each traveller, and identify those customers who require more employee interaction and dialogue. Vulnerability, level of travel experience, familiarity with systems and processes, age and experience, languages spoken, and available budgets are some of the criteria to be used in the triage process. However, technology does not necessarily lead to VCC (Kirova, 2021). Automated chatbots should not be used to provide personalized solutions but rather direct customers to the right services. The limitations of technology in providing personalized solutions based on safety needs can be addressed by empowered frontline employees with accommodating communication styles. Therefore, hiring and training employees with flexible conditions is necessary to increase a firm's communication capacity before an SMD occurs.

### **5.4. Limitations and future research**

This study has certain limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, it utilized a qualitative research approach, which makes it challenging to generalize the insights. To overcome

this limitation, future research could utilize quantitative approaches to measure the relationships identified in our study and establish causality. Secondly, this study focused solely on the tourist perspective. Future research should adopt an approach that incorporates the viewpoints of service providers and governments as key actors. This would enable the identification of the expectations and challenges of other actors regarding dialogue, access to information, transparency, and risk assessment during SMDs.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix 1

The participants' characteristics and types of travel cancellations.

Participant	Sex	Country of residence	Age	Type of travel cancellation
Participant 1	Female	USA	47	Cancelled flights, accommodation, train car rental, museum, castles and bike tours
Participant 2	Female	Portugal	44	Cancelled flights and hotels
Participant 3	Female	Cyprus	42	Cancelled flights and hotels
Participant 4	Female	UK	29	Cancelled flights and hotels.
Participant 5	Male	UK	44	Cancelled flights
Participant 6	Female	Mexico	45	Cancelled flights, hotels, and car rental
Participant 7	Male	Spain	30	Cancelled flights
Participant 8	Female	UAE	40	Cancelled flights and hotels
Participant 9	Male	China	29	Cancelled flights and hotels
Participant 10	Female	Ireland	33	Cancelled flights and accommodation
Participant 11	Female	Greece	34	Cancelled flights
Participant 12	Male	Sweden	28	Cancelled flights, car rentals, events (conferences) and distillery tour
Participant 13	Female	UK	33	Cancelled flights
Participant 14	Male	France	58	Cancelled flights, accommodation, train and car rental
Participant 15	Female	Hong Kong	32	Cancelled flights, a cruise trip, and accommodation
Participant 16	Female	Cyprus	50	Cancelled flights
Participant 17	Male	Monaco	36	Cancelled flights
Participant 18	Female	UK	57	Cancelled flights, hotel and cruises
Participant 19	Male	South Korea	70	Cancelled flights and accommodation (some bookings made via travel agencies)
Participant 20	Male	New Zealand	59	Cancelled flights, accommodation and sailing trip
Participant 21	Male	UK	50	Cancelled flights
Participant 22	Female	UK	40	Cancelled flights, trains, accommodation, and two events (a festival and an expo)
Participant 23	Male	Greece	38	Cancelled flights and accommodation
Participant 24	Male	Turkey	29	Cancelled flights and accommodation
Participant 25	Male	Belgium	39	Cancelled flights
Participant 26	Male	Italy	24	Cancelled flights
Participant 27	Male	China	53	Cancelled flights
Participant 28	Male	UAE	60	Cancelled flights and accommodation
Participant 29	Female	UK	64	Cancelled flights, accommodation, and an event
Participant 30	Female	UK	35	Cancelled flights and accommodation
Participant 31	Female	USA	61	Cancelled flights and accommodation
Participant 32	Female	Slovenia	51	Cancelled accommodation
Participant 33	Female	Belgium	35	Cancelled flights, accommodations, experiences and event
Participant 34	Male	Greece	42	Cancelled flight and accommodation
Participant 35	Female	Greece	25	Cancelled flights
Participant 36	Female	Norway	32	Cancelled flights and an event (Eurovision Song Contest)
Participant 37	Female	UK	62	Cancelled flights and accommodation