

## **Value Co-creation for Memorable Touristic Experiences: experimental evidence of the effects on consumer satisfaction and purchase intention**

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### **Abstract**

The integration of the Internet with other technologies has profoundly impacted consumer relations in the tourism and hospitality industry, enabling disintermediation and direct consumer access to service providers. In this challenging scenario, travel agencies may strategically tailor touristic services and deliver memorable experiences by engaging consumers in cocreating their travel itineraries. This study tests the hypothesis that involvement in a co-creation process with a tourist service provider positively affects consumer satisfaction and purchase intention. An experimental study was conducted to assess this, and the results supported the hypotheses. Moreover, practical implications are provided for travel agents operating both online and offline to enhance their competitiveness by incorporating co-creation processes into their routines, which can increase consumers' perceived value.

**Keywords:** Tourism; Co-Creation; Satisfaction; Travel Planning; Purchase Intention.

### **Resumo**

#### **Cocriação de Valor para Experiências Turísticas Memoráveis: evidências experimentais dos efeitos na satisfação do consumidor e na intenção de compra**

A integração da Internet com outras tecnologias teve um impacto profundo nas relações de consumo na indústria do turismo e da hospitalidade, permitindo a desintermediação e o acesso direto dos consumidores aos prestadores de serviços. Nesse cenário desafiador, as agências de viagens podem adaptar estrategicamente os serviços turísticos e proporcionar experiências memoráveis, envolvendo os consumidores na cocriação de seus itinerários de viagem. Esta pesquisa testa as hipóteses de que o envolvimento em um processo de cocriação com um prestador de serviços turísticos afeta positivamente a satisfação do consumidor e a intenção de compra. Foi realizado um estudo experimental para avaliar isso, e os resultados suportaram as hipóteses. Além disso, são fornecidas implicações práticas para agentes de viagens que operam tanto online quanto offline, a fim de melhorar sua competitividade incorporando processos de cocriação em suas rotinas, o que pode aumentar o valor percebido pelos consumidores.

**Palavras-chave:** Turismo; Cocriação; Satisfação; Planejamento de viagem; Intenção de compra.

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## Resumen

### **Cocreación de Valor para Experiencias Turísticas Memorables: evidencia experimental de los efectos en la satisfacción del consumidor y en la intención de compra**

La integración de Internet con otras tecnologías ha tenido un impacto profundo en las relaciones de consumo en el sector del turismo y la hospitalidad, permitiendo la desintermediación y el acceso directo a los consumidores de los proveedores de servicios. En este escenario desafiante, las agencias de viajes pueden adaptar estratégicamente los servicios turísticos y proporcionar experiencias memorables, involucrando a los consumidores en la cocreación de sus itinerarios de viaje. Este estudio buscó comprobar si la participación en un proceso de cocreación con un proveedor de servicios turísticos afecta positivamente la satisfacción del consumidor y la intención de compra. Se llevó a cabo un estudio experimental, y los resultados respaldaron las hipótesis. Además, se proporcionaron implicaciones prácticas para los agentes de viajes que operan tanto en línea como presencialmente, con el objetivo de mejorar su competitividad incorporando procesos de cocreación en sus rutinas, lo que puede aumentar el valor percibido por los consumidores.

**Palabras clave:** Turismo; Cocreación; Satisfacción; Planificación de viajes; Intención de compra.

## INTRODUCTION

tourism is a temporary travel activity from the consumer's original residence to a chosen destination, with the motive not to settle or earn a living but to satisfy curiosity, leisure, vacation, and other purposes (Meyers, 2009; Abdullah et al., 2020). The tourism industry is characterized by high-contact services in which consumers, more than ever, are looking for destinations that have the potential to meet their needs with a unique, memorable, and positive experience (Barnes et al., 2014; Hudson & Ritchie, 2009; Oh et al., 2007). Tourists explore a destination through experiences and increasingly seek original, authentic, and customized journeys rather than impersonal and conventional ones (Tussyadiah, 2014; Hosseini et al., 2021). Therefore, creating excellent and memorable consumer experiences has become a key objective in hospitality and tourism (Hwang & Seo, 2016).

Uysal et al. (2020) advocated that, due to the subjective nature of the tourist experience, each consumer perceives the same destination uniquely according to their cultural background and expectations. In this context, the co-creation process, when the consumer acts as a value creator by interacting and collaborating with the service provider to produce their unique experience, may play a significant role (Prebensen et al., 2013; Grisseman & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). The concept of value co-creation was derived from service-dominant (S-D) logic as developed and explained by Vargo and Lusch (2004). It attested that the consumer is not a passive user of the service but rather a "co-producer" and "co-creator" of the value-in-use (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008).

Conversely, the capability and proficiency in providing exclusive and memorable experiences for tourists have become perceived as noteworthy for

travel agencies in recent times (Wang et al., 2020). Although this can be achieved through co-creation engagement, when consumers and service providers share information and knowledge on a task-related activity (Grisseemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012), there is a lack of experimental research testing if it can influence tourism consumer behavior (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). Therefore, this study investigates whether engaging in a co-creation process with a tourism service provider affects consumer responses, especially satisfaction and purchase intention. An experimental study was conducted to assess these effects. The findings offer valuable insights and recommendations for travel agents, both online and offline, to enhance their competitiveness by integrating value co-creation processes into their strategic planning and operational procedures.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Consumer engagement in co-creation

Vargo and Lusch (2004) proposed a shift in marketing from focusing on tangible goods to emphasizing services, known as the service-dominant logic (S-D logic). This theoretical framework considers intangibility, exchange processes, and relationships as fundamental elements. This concept defines service as utilizing specialized competencies, such as knowledge and skills, through actions, processes, and performances to benefit another entity or the entity itself (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Thus, this dominant service-centric logic presents a philosophical reorientation that can be applied to all marketing offerings, including tangible goods (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). It recognizes that the consumer is always a co-producer of value by creating customized solutions that better fit their needs (Hoyer et al., 2010). In this concept, consumers, manufacturers, or service providers are never distinct because the value is co-created by interacting resources and competencies (Vargo et al., 2008).

Consumers can be considered value creators generating value during consumption (e.g., value-in-use). Value is sometimes co-created when firms interact directly by influencing consumers' value-creating process and engaging in dialogue. Co-creation has no value without interaction between the consumer and the company (Grönroos, 2008, 2011, 2012; Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Thus, consumer co-creation behavior is critical in the service setting because it impacts consumers' attitudes from passive spectators to active creators in service experiences (Lusch, Vargo, & O'Brien, 2007). To co-create experiences, the consumer and service provider must cooperate to create a better service offering. Co-creation of experiences is about how consumers interact with service providers to develop unique experiences (Mathis et al., 2015).

According to Sugathan and Ranjan (2019), co-creation in the tourism industry is becoming increasingly relevant due to technological advances that allow service providers to facilitate consumer participation and engagement (Neuhöfer et al., 2013). Likewise, consumers are more empowered, desire to control what they consume actively (Clarke & Raffay, 2015; Piller & Gülpén,

2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and realize that they can be relevant and valuable co-producers in creating, communicating, and delivering travel products and services (Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019), hence co-creating their own memorable and unique touristic experiences.

## Consumer satisfaction in travel planning

Consumer satisfaction is one of the indispensable constructs that companies must focus on (Mai & Cuong, 2021). According to Grisseemann and Stokburger-Sauer (2012), consumer satisfaction is an essential link between the company's activities and subsequent consumer behavior. Kotler and Keller (2016) attested that consumer satisfaction refers to a client's perception of happiness or frustration from comparing the performance of a product or service and their expectations. Therefore, consumer satisfaction is derived from the subjective assessment that the chosen option meets or exceeds expectations (Bloemer & de Ruyter, 1998).

Travel planning is a task-related co-creation process of consumers providing and sharing information and knowledge with service providers (Grisseemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). Specifically, in the consumer and tourism service providers' relationship context, the co-creation concept becomes particularly relevant to promote tourist satisfaction when designing unique touristic experiences involving engagement and a connection that links the tourist to the travel project (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Shaw et al., 2011). This collaborative travel planning process generates exclusive and memorable experiences that tourists should not find in a pre-defined standardized itinerary. Therefore, it allows tourists to customize services to their needs, increase the value generated, and enhance how their travel experience is perceived as unique, authentic, and valuable (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009), which may lead to expanded satisfaction.

Collaborative experiences create meaningful personal narratives (Gretzel et al., 2006) and long-lasting memories (Larsen, 2007). Throughout these processes, tourists can also materialize their creative potential (Arnould & Price, 1993; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Richards, 2010, 2011; Tan et al., 2013), using personal resources such as planning skills, technical competence, culture background and knowledge (Kozinets et al., 2004; Kreziak & Frochot, 2011; Prebensen et al., 2013).

According to Binkhorst and Dekker (2009), incorporating consumers into the travel planning process through co-creation endeavors can grant them heightened levels of power and control. Consequently, this approach can shape tourism products into immersive experiences that captivate tourists on multiple dimensions, encompassing their emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual realms (Prebensen et al., 2014). By fostering co-created experiences, consumers can achieve a profound sense of perceived quality, satisfaction, and gratification, endowing the tourist with enduring memories. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H1: Engagement in a co-creation process increases consumers' satisfaction in travel planning.*

## Travel purchase intention

Schiffman and Kanuk (2009) defined purchase intention as a precursor to buying decisions, signifying a cognitive process wherein individuals contemplate various choices before purchasing. The decision-making processes associated with consumer behavior play a pivotal role in shaping these intentions. Franke and Piller (2004) demonstrated that consumers are more inclined to purchase co-created products and services than standardized offerings.

Given tourism's experiential and intangible nature, consumers' purchasing intentions in this domain are often influenced by ambiguous alternatives, creating heightened expectations and unknown possibilities (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Consequently, tourism service choices are typically perceived as high-involvement and complex decision-making processes, leading consumers to experience a significant level of perceived risk and invest considerable time in information search to ensure their choices align with their desires and needs (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005; Kotler, 2008). In this context, collaborative efforts between consumers and travel professionals in co-creating travel arrangements play a crucial role in enabling tourists to make confident decisions and curate unique and memorable experiences that cater to their individual preferences and requirements (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012), thereby instilling a sense of assurance and enhancing purchase intentions (Woodside et al., 1997).

Moreover, when tourists are satisfied with their travel planning co-creation experiences, they are more likely to engage in repeat purchases, exhibit loyalty towards the service provider, and actively engage in positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Mathis et al., 2016; Prebensen et al., 2015). Based on the above discussions, the following hypothesis is proposed:

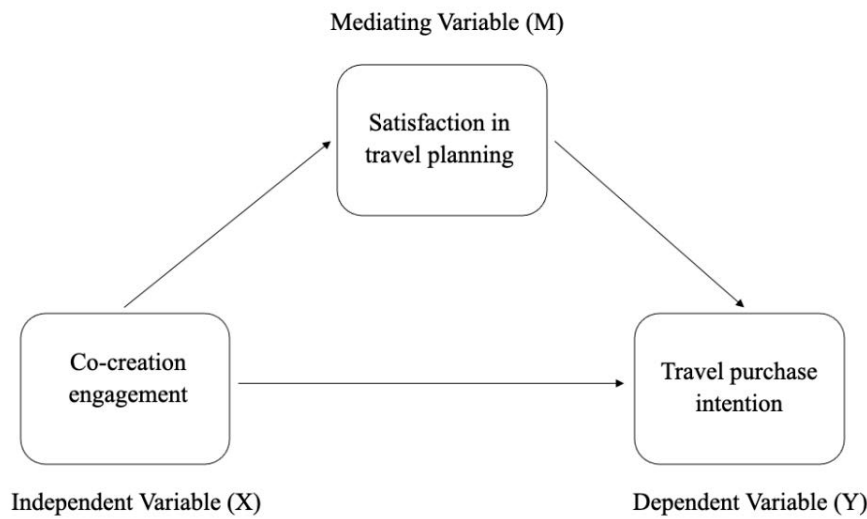
*H2: Engagement in a co-creation process increases consumers' travel purchase intention.*

## The mediating role of satisfaction

Mediation, or an indirect effect, occurs when the causal effect of an independent variable (X) on a dependent variable (Y) is transmitted by a mediator (M). Specifically, X affects Y because X affects M, and M, in succession, affects Y (Preacher, Rucker & Hayes, 2007).

Carvalho et al. (2020) conducted a study to examine the mediation effects of customer satisfaction on the relationship between product price, service quality, and purchasing decisions. Their research findings revealed that consumer satisfaction is a mediator, improving the relationship between service quality and consumer purchasing decisions. This study introduces Hypothesis 1 (H1), which proposes that engaging in a co-creation process with the travel service provider (i.e., travel agent) enhances consumer satisfaction with the travel planning process. Building upon the insights from Carvalho et al. (2020) and in light of their findings mentioned above, the following hypothesis (H3) is suggested, and the proposed model is represented in Figure 1.

*H3: Satisfaction in travel planning mediates the effect of engagement in the co-creation process on travel purchase intention.*

**Figure 1** – Conceptual model

Source: authors

## METHODOLOGY

### Choice of methodological approach

This study's methodological approach seeks valuable insights into the causal relationship between value co-creation and consumer responses. Specifically, through an experimental method, this study aims to manipulate consumers' engagement with the tourist service provider (i.e., the "travel agent") by simulating a co-creation process. The study sheds light on the causal link between value co-creation and consumer responses by comparing consumer satisfaction and purchase intention effects between those who engage in co-creation (treatment group) and those who receive a standard travel itinerary (control group). More specifically, this study offers evidence of the mediated effect of co-creation on travel purchase intention through satisfaction in travel planning.

### Experimental design

Sixty-six international travel prospects from Brazil participated in an online laboratory experiment conducted from April 20 to April 26, 2023. These participants met the criteria of having traveled abroad for tourism at least once in the five previous years. The potential leads were randomly assigned to either (1) a control group in which individuals received a standardized travel itinerary or (2) a treatment group in which individuals engaged in a co-creation process to design their itinerary.

The exact itinerary structure was presented to both groups. Hence, the destination and number of nights were equal (New York City, five nights). However, participants in the treatment group and a fictitious travel service provider co-created the travel itinerary that best suited them by choosing attractions - observatories, museums,



walking tours, Broadway shows, and restaurants - from a predetermined list of three options for each attraction (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** – Predetermined list of attractions to compose the travel itinerary

AGENT: Hello, I'm Richard! I'm a travel agent and would like to offer you a travel itinerary for New York, 5 nights. I will give you some suggestions for tours and attractions in the city so that we can create together the best itinerary for you. Shall we start creating your travel itinerary together? Please choose the option that suits you best based on my recommendations:

Q 1: On the first day, I suggest visiting one of NYC's famous observatories so that you can get an overview of the city. Which do you prefer?

1. Empire State Building Observation Deck
2. The Summit One Vanderbilt Observatory Deck
3. Edge

Q 2: On the second day, I recommend visiting one of the famous museums in NYC. Which do you prefer?

1. Ground Zero 9/11 Memorial Museum
2. American Museum of Natural History
3. Museum of Modern Art (MOMA)

Q 3: On the third, I recommend an outdoor walk. Please, choose the option that suits you best:

1. Central Park Bike Tour
2. Greenwich Village Walking Tour
3. Soho, Chinatown & Little Italy Walking Tour

Q 4: On the fourth day, at the end of the afternoon, nothing better than watching a Broadway show! Please choose one of the options:

1. The Lion King
2. Chicago
3. Harry Potter and the Cursed Child

Q 5: On the fifth day (the last night of the itinerary), a special "grand finale" dinner" Which restaurant do you prefer?

1. Carmine's
2. The Skylark
3. Carbone

**Source:** authors

**Note:** The original questionnaire was presented in Portuguese.

Conversely, the participants in the control group were not allowed to choose any of the attractions; each one was submitted to a short questionnaire for the simulated travel agent to get acquainted with them (Figure 3), followed by a travel itinerary randomly generated among the combination of attractions offered to participants in the treatment group. Therefore, there was no co-creation activity

among the participants of the control group and the fictitious travel service provider, according to the experimental design (Figure 4).

**Figure 3 –** Questions submitted to the participants in the control group

AGENT: Hello, I'm Richard, your travel agent responsible for planning your itinerary for New York 5 nights.

Q 1: First of all, I want to get to know you a bit better. Please answer how often you have traveled outside Brazil for leisure tourism in the past five years.

1. Once
2. Two to five times
3. More than five times

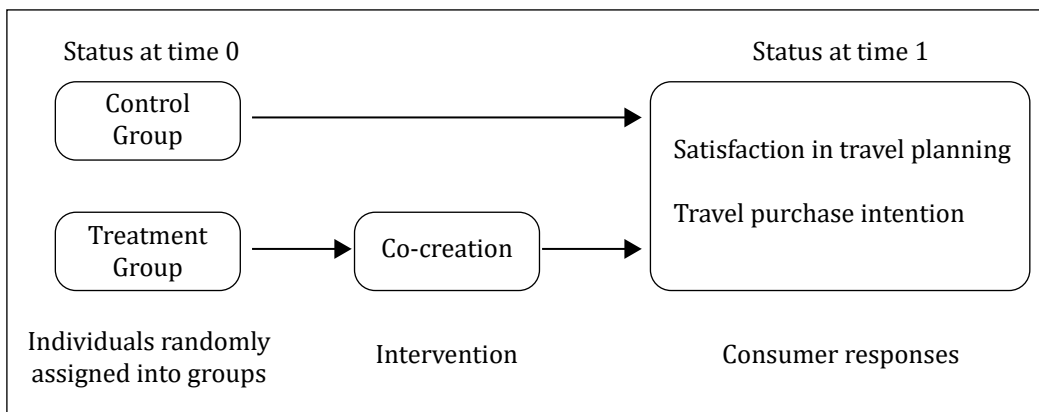
Q 2: What makes you the happiest during a trip?

1. Exploring new places and meeting new people
2. Gaining knowledge, a broader world perspective, and immersing in different cultures
3. Creating memorable stories and sharing experiences with loved ones

**Source:** authors

**Note:** The original questionnaire was presented in Portuguese

**Figure 4 –** Experimental design



**Source:** authors

### Data collection and sample

Subsequently, all participants answered questions intended to measure consumer satisfaction and purchase intention. Satisfaction in travel planning was measured with the scale proposed by Millan and Esteban (2003), employing the service encounters and empathy dimensions (Table 1), with 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree.” Regarding the travel purchase decision construct, a single item presented by Mullet and Karson (1985) was adopted (Table 2). Lastly, participants indicated their age, gender, nationality, education level, and whether they had previously visited New York.



**Table 1** – Items for satisfaction in travel planning, adapted from Millan & Esteban, 2003

Scale of satisfaction with the travel agent	
Dimension	Item
Service encounters	The travel agent provided services well
	The travel agent transmitted confidence
	The travel agent was accurate in providing the services
	The travel agent demonstrated ability to help me with my itinerary
	The travel agent assisted me and provided information individually
Empathy	The travel agent found the best options for me
	The travel agent demonstrated interest in solving my problems
	The travel agent demonstrated an understanding of my specific needs

**Source:** authors

**Note:** The original questionnaire was presented to participants in Portuguese

**Table 2** – The item for travel purchase intention, adapted from Mullet & Karson, 1985

Scale of travel purchase intention	
Respondent's stated intention	<p>Now, how likely is it that you, yourself, would purchase this travel itinerary? That is, would you say that you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- definitely will buy</li> <li>- probably will buy</li> <li>- may or may not buy</li> <li>- probably will not buy</li> <li>- definitely will not buy</li> </ul>

**Source:** authors

**Note:** The original questionnaire was presented to participants in Portuguese

Data collected were processed using IBM SPSS Statics 21® software and PROCESS macro for SPSS. A Model 4 from Hayes (2017) with the bootstrapping method was applied to test the mediation effect. The independent variable (engagement in a co-creation experience) was manipulated, while both the mediator (satisfaction in travel planning) and the dependent variable (purchase intention) were measured.

The sample predominantly comprised men (63.6%) aged 22 to 69 ( $M_{age} = 43.5$ ;  $SD_{age} = 11.6$ ). The majority were Postgraduates (60.60%), followed by Bachelor's (30.30%), while other levels of education represented less than 10% each. Most respondents had previously been to New York (71.21%). Table 3 shows the whole demographic structure of the sample.

**Table 3** – The demographic structure of the sample

Characteristics	Respondents	
	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	42	63.63
Female	24	36.36

(continues...)

**Table 3** – Continuation

Characteristics	Respondents	
	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Age</b>		
20-30	9	16.63
31-40	20	30.30
41 and more	37	56.06
<b>Have been to NY before?</b>		
Yes	47	71.21
No	19	28.78
<b>Level of Education</b>		
Secondary School	1	1.51
Incomplete Higher Education	5	7.57
Higher Education	20	30.30
Post Graduate (MsC, Ph. D.)	40	60.60

Source: authors

## RESULTS

Balance tests were employed to evaluate the effectiveness of the randomization process and ensure the equivalence of both groups regarding demographic characteristics. The outcomes of these tests unveiled no statistically significant disparities. Consequently, it can be concluded that the randomization process successfully achieved group comparability (table 4).

**Table 4** – Balance tests to evaluate the effectiveness of the randomization process between groups

Demographic Characteristic	Results	
Mean age of participants in both groups	NOT statistically different	$t(64) = 1.64, p = .106$
Gender distribution between groups	NOT statistically different	$X^2(1,66) = 1.05, p = .306$
Distribution of participants who previously visited NY before between groups	NOT statistically different	$X^2(1,66) = 0.67, p = .415$
Distribution of participant's educational background between groups	NOT statistically different	$X^2(3,66) = 6.11, p = .106$

Source: authors

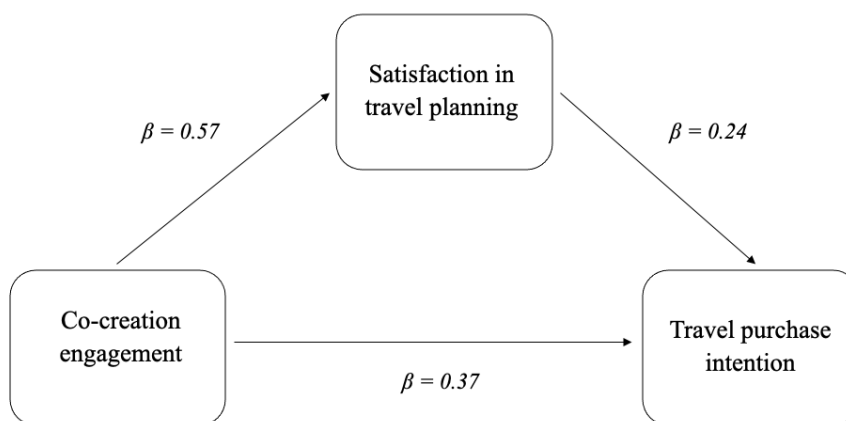
Consistent with Hypothesis 1 (H1), participants in the co-creation condition ( $M_{\text{co-creation}} = 3.75; SD_{\text{co-creation}} = 1.10$ ) reported higher satisfaction in travel planning ( $\alpha = .950$ ) than those in the control condition ( $M_{\text{control}} = 3.18; SD_{\text{control}} = 0.98; t(64) = -2.21, p < .05$ ). Considering the empathy dimension of satisfaction ( $\alpha = .920$ ), the predictions were also supported: participants in the co-creation condition ( $M_{\text{co-creation}} = 3.68; SD_{\text{co-creation}} = 1.14$ ) reported higher satisfaction in travel planning than those in the control condition ( $M_{\text{control}} = 2.93; SD_{\text{control}} = 1.01$ ;

$t(64) = -2.80, p < .01$ ). However when the service encounter dimension is considered ( $\alpha = .914$ ), participants in the co-creation condition ( $M_{\text{co-creation}} = 3.83$ ;  $SD_{\text{co-creation}} = 1.14$ ) did not differ in satisfaction in travel planning compared to those in the control condition ( $M_{\text{control}} = 3.42$ ;  $SD_{\text{control}} = 1.08$ ;  $t(64) = -1.47, p = .146$ ). Thus, H1 is partially supported.

Corroborating with Hypothesis 2 (H2), participants in the co-creation condition ( $M_{\text{co-creation}} = 3.70$ ;  $SD_{\text{co-creation}} = 0.85$ ) reported higher travel purchase intention than those in the control condition ( $M_{\text{control}} = 3.09$ ;  $SD_{\text{control}} = 0.91$ ;  $t(64) = -2.79, p < .01$ ).

To test whether satisfaction in travel planning mediated the effect of co-creation on travel purchase intention, a mediation analysis with 5,000 bootstrap samples was conducted. The analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of co-creation engagement on travel purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.24, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.02, 0.54]$ ). The total effect was significant ( $\beta = 0.61, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.17, 1.04]$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but the direct effect was not substantial ( $\beta = 0.37, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.03, 0.76]$ ,  $p = .066$ ). Therefore, the results support Hypothesis 3 (H3), which states that satisfaction in travel planning mediates the effect of co-creation engagement on travel purchase intention (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – Mediation analysis results



Source: authors

## DISCUSSION

This study empirically examines the potential positive effect resulting from the engagement in value co-creation between consumers and tourist service providers, specifically travel agents. The primary focus is to investigate whether this effect manifests through increased consumer satisfaction with the travel planning process and heightened purchase intention. An experimental methodology was selected to provide robust evidence and address a research gap in the field of tourism, as empirical evidence regarding the effects of co-creation on tourists' satisfaction and behavior remains limited. Numerous research inquiries in this domain still need to be answered (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012).

This research's findings reinforce Service-Dominant (S-D) logic, showcasing how engaging consumers in co-creation enhances their experience. It validates the theory's perspective on consumer empowerment as key in shaping service outcomes and satisfaction. At the heart of S-D logic is the idea that consumer satisfaction and value perception are linked to their involvement in creating services. The data from this study, showing higher satisfaction levels among participants in co-creation activities, underscores the benefits of consumer participation in service design. By allowing travelers to customize their experiences, this research supports S-D logic's core principles and highlights practical ways the tourism industry can employ consumer empowerment. Such empowerment leads to more personalized and resonant experiences, aligning with consumers' desires for autonomy and customization, thereby offering service providers in tourism strategies to boost satisfaction and deepen consumer engagement.

In line with S-D logic, as proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004), which views consumers as active value co-creators tailoring solutions to their needs, this study explores the dynamic between consumers and service providers in tourism, focusing on value co-creation's role in enhancing satisfaction and influencing purchase intentions. The experimental results lend weight to S-D logic's critical points by showing that participants involved in co-creation reported greater satisfaction with their travel planning compared to those who received a standard itinerary. This suggests that even a simulated interaction with a travel agent, offering limited choices, can foster a co-creation experience, resonating with S-D logic's foundational principles. Moreover, examining aspects like service encounters and empathy provides deeper insights into S-D logic's application in tourism and consumer behavior, illustrating the implications of value co-creation in improving consumer experiences in the tourism sector.

Therefore, the findings presented in this study contribute empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that co-creation engagement has positive effects on tourists' satisfaction and behavior. Moreover, the study reveals that consumer satisfaction is a mediating factor in the relationship between co-creation and travel purchase intention.

## **Consumer satisfaction in travel planning**

The experimental study conducted in this research demonstrates that participants in the co-creation condition (i.e., intervention group) reported significantly higher satisfaction levels in travel planning than those in the control condition. This pattern of results is consistent when considering the empathy dimension of satisfaction. However, when examining the service encounter dimension, participants in the co-creation condition did not exhibit significant differences in satisfaction with travel planning compared to those in the control condition. These findings do not support the hypothesis suggesting a disparity in satisfaction with service encounters between the two groups.

It is important to note that the service encounter dimension comprises tangible elements related to the service framework provided (Millán & Esteban, 2004). Nevertheless, when this dimension was considered, engaging in a co-creation

process did not generate a discernible impact on participants' perception of the service the travel agent provided compared to those who received a standard travel itinerary. This outcome may be attributed to the experimental setting, which provided a short duration and low physical contact experience. Therefore, participants may require additional conditions to form a more accurate impression of the service.

Otherwise, significant differences in satisfaction between the two groups emerge when considering the empathy dimension. The definition of empathy proposed by Millán and Esteban (2003) forms the basis for this evaluation. They attested that empathy refers to the agent's capacity to provide a service that can be adjusted to meet the consumer's specific needs and requirements, ensuring that each client receives a customized service.

Consequently, when the empathy dimension was considered, this study's experimental results indicate that a co-creation process in travel planning contributes to an enhanced quality of relationship between consumers and their sales consultants, i.e., the travel agent. This is reflected in increased trust, commitment, reciprocity, and exchange efficiency fostered through empathy (Prior, 2016). Stock and Hoyer (2005) attested that the relationship between salespeople's consumer-oriented attitudes and behavior, as consumers perceive, is reinforced when salespeople exhibit a high level of empathy, mainly through empathetic listening (Drollinger & Comer, 2013).

In conclusion, the connection between consumers and travel service providers in a co-creation process and the resulting value enhancement in their relationship through heightened satisfaction with empathy is crucial for travel agencies to promote consumer satisfaction and, consequently, achieve increased sales conversion, customer loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Rajah et al., 2008; Sugathan et al., 2018).

## **Travel purchase intention**

This study's findings indicate that participants in the co-creation condition exhibited significantly higher travel purchase intention levels than those in the control condition. These results validate the hypothesis put forth in this research, which posits that collaborative engagement between consumers and service providers in the co-creation of travel arrangements facilitates the development of personalized and memorable experiences that align with the individual needs of tourists (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012), providing a more assured and confident purchase intention.

These results are consistent with the proposition that the level of consumer involvement in the travel planning process (i.e., through co-creation) positively influences their purchase intention, reducing tourist's perceived emotional risk of making wrong choices in the face of the initial travel itinerary set of alternatives (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Thus, co-creation engagement potentially leads consumers to make more confident decisions when considering purchasing travel services.

## The mediating role of satisfaction

The mediation analysis conducted in this study indicates that consumer satisfaction plays a mediating role in the impact of co-creation on travel purchasing decisions. Jussila et al. (2015) have advocated that consumer engagement in the co-creation of a product or service fosters a sense of control and ownership (Karahanna et al., 2015), leading to satisfaction and subsequently encouraging positive attitudes (Asatryan & Oh, 2008), which, in turn, can translate into heightened purchase intentions.

Similarly, when tourists actively participate in co-creating their travel itineraries with the travel service provider, it positively influences their overall satisfaction with the process. This heightened satisfaction can strengthen their purchase intention. Consequently, consumer satisfaction is a mediating factor in the relationship between co-creation and travel purchase intention.

## Theoretical contributions

Viglia and Dolnicar (2020) highlighted that the general knowledge generated in tourism studies primarily focuses on examining non-causal relationships between constructs, essentially through assessing correlations. While correlations can indicate potential causal associations, they cannot establish definitive cause-and-effect connections among variables. To address this limitation and provide practical and managerial insights, experimental methodology becomes imperative (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). Therefore, the experimental method employed in the current study aims to fill a gap in previous tourism research by offering compelling causal evidence. Specifically, it investigates the causal impact of co-creation engagement on consumer responses, especially satisfaction and purchase intention, providing robust empirical evidence with strong internal validity.

The empirical findings of this study substantiate the hypotheses regarding the positive effects of co-creation on tourists' satisfaction and purchase intention. Moreover, the mediating role of satisfaction in influencing consumers' travel purchasing decisions is revealed. This discovery advances our understanding of how consumer satisfaction mediates the relationship between co-creation and travel purchase intention, offering novel theoretical perspectives on the construct of consumer satisfaction and its significance. Consequently, consumer-centric companies striving to satisfy and retain their customers (Cakici et al., 2019) must recognize that value co-creation can effectively lead to consumer satisfaction, consequently fostering higher purchase intention. This viewpoint underscores the pivotal role of co-creation engagement for travel companies in maintaining their competitiveness.

## Managerial contributions

When organizations actively encourage co-creation engagement, they establish collaborative partnerships with customers to develop compelling



offerings that empower them to make better-informed decisions regarding products or services (Bai, 2018). This approach generates value that benefits the firm in terms of increased revenues, profits, and referrals (Payne & Frow, 2005) and allows the firm to optimize these benefits by adopting co-creation practices (Vuletic et al., 2017). Additionally, co-creation fosters enterprise integration and stimulates innovation, creating new business value (Xu, 2015). Implementing value co-creation is crucial for firms to build a sustainable future (Li, 2014).

In the tourism and hospitality industry, the advent of the Internet and its integration with other technologies has uniquely impacted consumer relationships (Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019), facilitating disintermediation and enabling direct consumer access to tourism service providers. Co-creation engagement serves as a valuable strategic choice for tourism intermediaries, especially travel agencies, to re-establish their roles as co-creators of value (Grisseemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Shaw et al., 2011), enhancing consumers' perceived value of the overall experience at a relatively low cost (Eletxigerra et al., 2020).

Prior marketing research has demonstrated the various ways in which co-creation can generate value, encompassing outcomes such as enhanced consumer satisfaction, increased customer loyalty, and a greater likelihood of positive word-of-mouth recommendations within the tourism domain (Rajah et al., 2008; Sugathan et al., 2018). Apart from the focal constructs examined in this study, namely consumer satisfaction in travel planning and travel purchase intention, practitioners must acknowledge and consider these additional benefits resulting from engaging in co-creation practices within the tourism industry.

Lastly, it is recommended that managers within tourism and hospitality organizations establish well-defined protocols and implement streamlined processes to encourage active participation from consumers as co-creators of their own tourist experiences. In doing so, managers play a pivotal role, utilizing their teams and leveraging technological resources to foster value co-creation processes. This collaborative approach facilitates the engagement of service providers with consumers, ultimately enabling the co-production of superior touristic experiences surpassing those offered by competitors (Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019).

## CONCLUSIONS

The underlying theoretical framework in this study posits that engaging in co-creation positively influences consumer satisfaction during the travel planning process and subsequently impacts their intention to make travel-related purchases. This, in turn, enhances consumer relationships with travel service providers, particularly travel agents. An experimental study was conducted to empirically evaluate the impact of co-creation engagement on tourists' satisfaction and purchase intention.

The study's findings provided empirical evidence that supports the hypothesis of a positive effect of co-creation on these constructs. Furthermore, the study uncovered the mediating role of consumer satisfaction in influencing travel-related purchase decisions and highlighted the significance of empathy in achieving consumer satisfaction. These insights offer valuable guidelines for



travel agents operating both online and offline, suggesting integrating value co-creation processes into their strategic planning and operational practices to enhance consumers' perceived value of the overall experience (Eletxigerra et al., 2020).

A laboratory experiment was selected as the experimental setting for the research presented in this study. The rationale behind this choice arises from its advantages in terms of environmental control, participants' awareness of being part of a research, and mitigating external influences (Lieberman et al., 2019). Nevertheless, laboratory experiment use has been criticized for its limited external validity, primarily due to low contextual realism (Dahlstrom et al., 2008).

Therefore, it's crucial to acknowledge the inherent limitations of selecting a laboratory setting for this research. Participants were not allowed to interact with a human agent or engage in a face-to-face encounter at an actual travel agency during their simulated travel planning process. This likely contributed to the absence of significant differences in the results concerning the dimension of service encounter, as participants in the co-creation condition exhibited similar levels of satisfaction with travel planning compared to those in the control condition.

Consequently, a novel hypothesis arises, suggesting that the extent of human interaction moderates the relationship between co-creation and satisfaction with service encounters. Different levels of human interaction are expected to influence the magnitude and significance of this effect. Therefore, future research endeavors should employ experimental designs in settings that closely resemble real-life scenarios, thus ensuring a more precise assessment of the impact of human interaction with enhanced external validity.

In addition, the research design did not include a manipulation check. Thus, there is a limited capacity to assert that participants in the control condition perceived to have experienced a greater degree of co-creation than those in the control group. In this sense, it's recommended that future research should consider not only including manipulation checks but also evaluating different levels of co-creation.

Moreover, regarding the empathy dimension, considering the intricate and subjective nature of the phenomenon, a qualitative approach is recommended for comprehensively exploring its significance in consumer satisfaction, allowing for a broader and deeper understanding of its complexity. However, further experimental endeavors to investigate the effects of co-creation on consumers' responses should also be meticulously designed to ensure greater accuracy and realism.

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## **CONTRIBUTIONS:**

**Luiz Filipe Naressi Fortunato:** Definition of the research problem and objectives; development of the theoretical proposition; realization of the bibliographic review and theoretical foundation; choice of methodological procedures; data collection; preparation of tables, graphs and figures; critical revision of the manuscript; write the manuscript; adaptation of the manuscript to RTA rules.

**Gilberto Sarfati:** Definition of the research problem and objectives; development of the theoretical proposition; choice of methodological procedures; critical revision of the manuscript; write the manuscript.

**Yuri Marcel Dallabrida:** Data collection; data analysis; preparation of tables, graphs and figures; construction of calculations and projections; critical revision of the manuscript; write the manuscript; adaptation of the manuscript to RTA rules.