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Abstract

This research investigates the business models of organisations operating within the responsible tourism sector. It further positions responsible tourism as an alternative, or more accurately, a potential evolution of mass tourism, which remains the dominant paradigm despite its well-documented negative environmental, economic, social, and cultural impacts, further amplified when discussed within the overtourism context. While international institutions such as the World Tourism Organization, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasise the importance of sustainable tourism development, and the demand for sustainable tourism options is expected to grow exponentially, the sector remains largely “niche”. The study aims to analyse the business models of twenty-three selected responsible tourism tour operators using the Value Creation, Delivery, and Capture framework. Building on this analysis, the research seeks to develop a unified framework, conceptualised as a “human-centred” model, that integrates key factors identified across these organisations.

Although the concept of the business model is widely used in management studies, it has not been explicitly recognised as a central element in the academic discourse on sustainable tourism. Moreover, much of the existing literature has primarily focused on environmental sustainability, particularly on how tourism organisations integrate it into their business models and derive competitive advantage from it, while other dimensions of sustainability have been comparatively overlooked. The objective of the research is pursued by collecting qualitative data, combining secondary data with primary data collected through semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of these organisations’ strategies and business models. The data analysis follows a Grounded Theory Approach, applying the Gioia Methodology. The findings lead to the development of a consolidated business model framework, and its potential to contribute to a broader paradigm shift within the tourism industry will be discussed through a final reflection on the concept of scalability.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Current Tourism Landscape

Pololikashvili, the Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism¹) explains, “As society progresses, the tourism sector, much like many other sectors, needs to transform to serve as a catalyst for prosperity at a universal scale. Enhancing the well-being of individuals, safeguarding the natural environment, stimulating economic advancement, and fostering international harmony are key goals [...]”

Tourism has become a highly accessible commodity in today’s consumer-driven leisure society and represents one of the fastest-growing industries worldwide. While it plays a vital role in a country’s economic growth, its impact extends far beyond financial benefits, bringing as well negative environmental, economic, and socio-cultural consequences on a global scale. However, given its significant contribution to many economies, governments and businesses often prioritise mass tourism due to the substantial revenue it generates. This form of tourism thus remains the most popular, taking into account that it is no longer confined solely to traditional package holidays, but it represents a more flexible and multifaceted phenomenon.

According to the UN Tourism (2025), global international tourist arrivals reached an estimated 1.4 billion in 2024, marking an 11% increase from 2023. Additionally, most destinations reported visitor numbers surpassing pre-pandemic levels, highlighting a strong and sustained recovery from the downturn that was registered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Continued growth is expected for 2025, with international tourist arrivals projected to increase by 3% to 5% compared to 2024. Remarking on this forecast, UN Tourism Secretary-General Pololikashvili stated, “[...] Growth is expected to continue throughout 2025, driven by strong demand contributing to the socio-economic development of both mature and emerging destinations. This recalls our immense responsibility as a sector to

¹ Formerly UNWTO

accelerate transformation, placing people and planet at the centre of the development of tourism.”

In recent years, sustainability has become a crucial factor in shaping effective tourism development strategies. The UNEP Green Economy Report (2011) addresses tourism as one of the ten key economic sectors where transitioning to sustainable practices can drive economic growth, create job opportunities, and help reduce poverty. Furthermore, it is essential to note that there is an increasing tourist demand for more environmentally sustainable options, reflecting a broader shift in consumer expectations towards greener, more responsible tourism (UN Tourism, n.d.).

One key data point that helps in understanding the future trajectory of tourism is the projection for the ecotourism sector. Although the concept of ecotourism will be examined in greater detail in *Chapter 2*, it can be considered synonymous with sustainable tourism, with a particular emphasis on the environmental dimension of sustainability. According to Statista (2024), the global ecotourism market, which stood at USD 172.4 billion in 2022, is forecasted to reach USD 374.2 billion by 2028, reflecting a CAGR of 13.9%. Additionally, a 2022 survey revealed that over 83% of global travellers consider sustainable tourism important, indicating a widespread openness to change. Although this figure might be influenced by social desirability bias and may not fully reflect the respondents’ genuine views and feelings, it still signals a notable trend towards an openness to a paradigm shift within the tourism industry.

Given the current global relevance of tourism, its projected growth, and the transformative vision for its future, this study explores the way to a paradigm shift that repositions people, the environment, and sustainable economic progress at the core of tourism development. The research is rooted in the premise that tourism must evolve ethically, ensuring that exploitation does not define its development. Rather than prioritising short-term gains, the industry must adopt a long-term, responsible approach that balances economic viability with social and environmental management. To sustain its future, tourism must foster collaboration with local communities and stakeholders, integrating itself into the local fabric rather than merely extracting value from it and redirecting it towards a few specific countries.

Hence, effective management can play a crucial role in mitigating tourism's impact in the 21st century, implying a fundamental shift in how the sector is developed. Only by ensuring shared financial and sustainable benefits can tourism enhance its global reputation and secure its role as a force for positive development.

1.2 Research Foundations

1.2.1 Research Gaps in Theory and Practice

Sustainability has become a dominant theme in contemporary tourism literature, and mainstream tourism-related businesses and organisations have widely adopted its terminology. Indeed, efforts suggest a growing recognition of sustainability within the tourism sector. However, the practical application of sustainability remains largely superficial, with an overwhelming focus on environmental sustainability, while the social and economic dimensions receive considerably less attention. Furthermore, most sustainability initiatives implemented by tourism businesses prioritise low-cost practices such as recycling programs, energy conservation, and limited community engagement efforts. While these actions may enhance corporate reputation and generate operational cost savings, they do not reflect a fundamental shift in business models or decision-making frameworks. A clear example is the widespread adoption of hotel signage encouraging guests to reuse towels under the premise of environmental conservation, an initiative that, while beneficial, represents only a minor and largely symbolic contribution to sustainability. Although such measures may provide some ecological and social benefits, they remain superficial; they do not signify a fundamental shift in the core operational paradigms that guide tourism corporations. Consequently, while terms such as “smart growth” or “sustainable development” are frequently used in the corporate discourse, there is, for instance, rarely any commitment to limiting expansion or cancelling projects in favour of ecological or social priorities.

Thus, the first identified gap is not merely a literature gap, but rather a real-world gap concerning the application and scope of sustainability within the tourism

sector. Indeed, academic research tends to focus primarily on the environmental dimension of sustainability, and the same emphasis is also reflected in the implementation of business models within the tourism industry. Due to increased awareness of environmental issues, both scholars and industry practitioners tend to prioritise environmental practices over other dimensions of sustainability. This gap in research and industry practice highlights the need for a more integrated approach to sustainability in tourism, one that moves beyond environmental concerns to encompass social equity and long-term economic viability.

The existing academic research on sustainable tourism primarily examines how businesses integrate sustainability into their operations, often in response to external inputs such as regulatory requirements, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, or evolving market trends. Furthermore, a significant portion of the current research focuses on large-scale tour operators, specifically analysing their adoption of environmentally sustainable practices, such as supply chain optimisation and environmental impact reduction, as an “add-on” implementation to conventional business models. These studies further provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by established tourism enterprises transitioning toward sustainability. Another key area of academic inquiry concerns the motivations driving businesses to integrate sustainability practices and the impact of such integration on business performance. Much of the literature explores sustainability as a strategic decision aimed at enhancing competitiveness, corporate reputation, and customer loyalty.

Finally, most of the literature frames sustainability as an operational adjustment rather than a foundational business principle. Large tour operators, given their market influence, are often studied for their ability to implement sustainability measures that have a broad multiplier effect across the industry. Case studies frequently centre on dominant industry players, such as TUI, reinforcing the assumption that large-scale businesses are the primary drivers of sustainable transformation. While these insights are valuable, they leave a significant gap in understanding how smaller, sustainability-driven tour operators design and implement business models where sustainability is embedded at the core rather than added as an auxiliary strategy. Unlike mainstream tour operators adapting to sustainability trends, smaller responsible tourism enterprises build their value

propositions, stakeholder relationships, and operational strategies around environmental conservation, community well-being, and economic redistribution. These businesses face distinct strategic and operational challenges, such as financial viability, market positioning, and scalability, that remain underexplored in the literature. The prevailing research focusing on large corporations' incremental sustainability efforts results in an incomplete understanding of sustainable tourism, failing to capture the full spectrum of business models that prioritise sustainability from the outset and through all its dimensions.

In fact, moving onto the second identified gap, despite the extensive exploration of business models in management and strategy research, their role in sustainable tourism remains under-theorised. Sustainable Business Models (SBMs) are primarily discussed in multidisciplinary and sustainability-focused journals, rather than in tourism-specific literature. As noted by Coles et al. (2016), the concept of business models has been largely overlooked within the discourse on sustainable tourism and has not been explicitly addressed as a distinct concept in this field. Furthermore, when business models are addressed in the tourism literature, they are often analysed in relation to sustainability as a competitive advantage rather than as a transformative framework for redefining tourism enterprises. This oversight reflects the dominant industry trend in which businesses implement sustainability initiatives as supplementary strategies rather than integrating them into the fundamental structure of their operations. By continuing to prioritise research on sustainability as an adaptation within existing models, the literature risks neglecting the innovative potential and challenges of enterprises that are sustainable by design. Addressing this gap is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability in tourism, one that acknowledges both incremental and foundational approaches to sustainable business model development.

The concept emerging from these two identified gaps is that the dominant approach within both academic literature and real-world business practices focuses on adapting mass tourism, mainly through the private sector, to make it more sustainable, especially in terms of environmental impact. However, this adaptation tends to remain limited, aiming primarily to mitigate the negative consequences of

mass tourism rather than shifting away from it. This concept is shared by Sigala (2008), who argues that mass tourism must evolve to support sustainability, as it is more effective to address its negative impacts through adaptation rather than attempting to radically change the paradigm. While the efforts to reduce the industry's footprint are commendable, the research seeks to shed light on a different perspective by incorporating actors and business models that have not been extensively considered in previous studies.

1.2.2 Conceptual Positioning of Alternative Forms of Tourism

The research is grounded in the perspective that alternative forms of tourism should not be seen merely as oppositional to mass tourism but rather as potential sources for a paradigm shift within the tourism industry. Furthermore, the study assumes that conventional tourism is not beyond repair and that it does not need to be discarded entirely. Instead, it should be nurtured with new logics guiding it towards the adoption of better practices as foundational principles. Meaning that the idea is not to reject the mass tourism model outright, as such a drastic shift would be unrealistic, but rather to shift the paradigm gradually by integrating sustainable core values from the bottom into the existing framework. The concept of a paradigm shift, central to this research, is inspired by Kuhn's (1970). In this context, a paradigm shift in tourism is not about eliminating the current model but transforming it. This research posits that the transformation is necessary, as the current paradigm is no longer viable in the face of growing environmental, social, and economic challenges. Furthermore, although consumer demand is often driven by extreme consumerism, available data suggests an increasing openness, as discussed in *Section 1.1*, indicating a potential readiness for change.

Hence, although organisations that promote or operate within alternative forms of tourism - such as ecotourism, responsible tourism, solidarity tourism, among many others whose core values differ significantly from those embedded in the mass tourism model - are currently perceived as catering to a niche market, it is crucial to explore their business models and their potential for large-scale development.

Furthermore, it is worth considering that the level of engagement with these alternative tourism models, though still relatively modest in absolute terms, would have been unthinkable just twenty years ago.

The research engages with Theng's (2015) critical question: "Should we oppose these two approaches or consider them as complementary in their respective environments, and can they share the same place?" Rather than treating alternative forms of tourism as an outright opposition or substitute to the mass tourism paradigm, they should be understood as a driving force, a catalyst for a paradigm shift within the broader tourism industry. This perspective challenges the conventional dichotomy between mass and alternative tourism, advocating instead for a model where alternative forms of tourism reshape and redefine the broader industry rather than existing in isolated niche markets. However, this perspective must be accompanied by a critical awareness of the risk of a paradigm nudge, where sustainability is superficially integrated without fundamentally transforming the dominant tourism model.

1.2.3 The Role of Tour Operators

While acknowledging the crucial role of consumers in shaping tourism trends, this study posits that a paradigm shift can be potentially driven by the industry rather than by consumer demand or governmental intervention, whose actions remain fundamentally vital. This means that the supply side, specifically tourism operators, holds the capacity to actively reshape the market by redefining the available offerings. Unlike governmental bodies such as Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), which primarily regulate and manage tourism flows through policy implementation, industry stakeholders can instigate transformation from within, influencing demand without the need for restrictive top-down interventions.

Furthermore, discussions on mass tourism and overtourism often place the tourist at the centre of criticism, framing them as the primary party responsible for unsustainable practices. However, this perspective overlooks a fundamental reality:

demand is largely shaped by supply. The way tourism is structured, what is offered, how it is marketed, and the incentives provided play a decisive role in guiding consumer behaviour. As Gay (2024) rightly questions, “When we speak of overtourism, we place tourists in the position of the accused, but is it not instead those who have to organise their reception – political authorities and private players – who are responsible?” This prompts a necessary shift in perspective, rather than attributing responsibility solely to travellers; it is essential to recognise that the tourism industry itself holds the power to redefine its own operational models. Therefore, this research focuses on responsible tourism tour operators as key agents of change, exploring how they can realign supply in ways that naturally drive shifts in demand and foster a sustainable transformation of the sector.

Specifically, tour operators have played a pivotal role in shaping the tourism industry, being essentially the original enablers of the development of mass tourism, and having directed large tourist movements, hence bearing a considerable amount of responsibility. Furthermore, tour operators hold a strategic positioning as they act as key intermediaries between destinations and travellers and hold the ability to influence both supply and demand. This makes them important stakeholders in the paradigm transition. Additionally, given their extensive networks and close collaboration with different stakeholders, they possess significant leverage to drive change at multiple levels. Therefore, this research focuses on tour operators because, as they were enablers of mass tourism, they are believed to have the potential to act as catalysts for a paradigm shift from mass tourism towards responsible tourism.

1.3 Research Question and Thesis Structure

Building upon the conceptual foundations outlined above, this research seeks to address a critical question at the intersection of tourism development and sustainability. While responsible tourism has emerged as a viable alternative, or progression, to mass tourism, its impact remains limited in scale, often constrained by niche market positioning and fragmented implementation. Understanding how the

business models of organisations promoting responsible tourism are constructed, and whether their core principles can be consolidated into a scalable framework, becomes essential in evaluating their potential for broader industry transformation.

Thus, this study aims to answer the following research question: *What are the key components of responsible tour operators' business models, and how do they create, deliver, and capture value in line with sustainability principles to drive a paradigm shift in the tourism industry?*

To address the research question, the study begins, in *Chapter 2*, with an introductory literature review that examines two overarching themes. First, it explores mass tourism by analysing its definition through two key perspectives that shape the broader understanding of the paradigm shift. The premise is that without a shift from a deterministic discourse to a flexible conceptualisation of mass tourism, a true paradigm shift cannot take place. This section traces the origins and evolution of mass tourism, followed by a critical assessment of its economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts. Among these, particular attention is given to the phenomenon of overtourism, which exemplifies the adverse consequences of mass tourism's excessive growth. The literature review then, on the other hand, introduces the concept of sustainability within the tourism industry, followed by an analysis of the various alternative forms of tourism that have emerged, each with distinct focal points. The study also examines the role of tourism in achieving the objectives outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. To lay the groundwork for *Chapter 3*, through an analysis of open sources from international organisations, particular emphasis is placed on the critical role of the private sector in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting its responsibility in driving systemic change within the industry.

Chapter 3 provides the managerial foundation for the research. Through an extensive review of existing academic literature, the chapter opens with a broad examination of the impact of the 2030 Agenda on academic research, and the multi-stakeholder approach. It then narrows further to the theoretical framework underpinning this study, encompassing the intersection of sustainable tourism, tour operators, and business model theory. Within this discourse, three key themes emerge:

the implementation of sustainable practices, the role of supply chain management as a critical area of sustainability application, and the link between sustainability initiatives and firm performance. To establish a connection between this broader literature and the specific business model framework applied in this study, the chapter also evaluates the distinction between sustainability as an add-on measure and sustainability as a core strategic component of the business model. Finally, the discussion incorporates the contributions of key scholars in the development of business model theory, particularly focusing on the value creation, delivery and capture framework, and the evolution of the sustainable business model (SBM).

Chapter 4 outlines the study's research methodology, explaining the qualitative approach used to investigate in depth the business models of the responsible tour operators selected as case studies. The chapter first outlines the criteria used for selecting the responsible tourism-related organisations analysed in the research. It further explores the reason behind the choice of selecting tour operators that are partners of the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism (AITR), being their certified alignment with the core principles of responsible tourism, thereby enhancing the reliability of the selected case studies. Subsequently, the chapter details the data collection process, which integrates secondary sources - both open sources documentation and internal documentation provided for the analysis directly by the tour operators - for all 23 selected tour operators with primary data gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with the President of the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism (AITR) and the Founder and President of a well-and-long-established responsible tour operator, Viaggi Solidali. The structure of the interviews and the theoretical background of the protocols' construction are explained, along with a profile of the key informants involved. Finally, for the data analysis, the study adopts a Grounded Theory approach, specifically using the Gioia Methodology. The methodology chapter, thus, outlines the coding process and the construction of the Gioia data structure, which enables the systematic development of categories and theoretical concepts based on the data itself.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the analysis conducted, organised according to the three core components of the business model theoretical framework: value creation, value delivery, and value capture, as well as developed through the three aggregate dimensions that emerged from the data analysis using the Gioia Methodology. The findings provide a unified framework that highlights how responsible tour operators integrate the principles of responsible tourism into their business models. The value created by responsible tour operators is structured across three main dimensions: experiential, relational, and ethical-economic, and it takes form through the offering of tourism products characterised by specific features, such as small travel groups, relaxed pacing, community encounters, and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, value is created through a supply chain that is firmly integrated into the local economy of the destination. This section also includes a mapping of key stakeholders, and a description of the type of relationships established between the organisations and their stakeholders. In terms of value delivery, the findings focus on two main elements: customer relationships and marketing and sales strategies, meaning that value is delivered through a carefully managed direct and continuous relationship with the customer. Regarding value capture, the analysis shows that, alongside organisational financial sustainability, equal importance is given to economic transparency and the fair redistribution of captured value to the local population. The chapter concludes by presenting the authors' conceptualisation of a "human-centred" business model, based on the unified framework developed through the findings of the analysis. This section defines and explores how the business model of responsible tour operators is centred around the human dimension and prioritises the well-being of the individuals who are involved, directly or indirectly, in their activities.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings presented in *Chapter 5*, comparing the developed unified business model framework with the main characteristics of the business model of mass-market tour operators. The comparison is followed by a critical reflection on responsible tour operators' business model scalability and transformative potential for a paradigm shift. Finally, the chapter discusses the limitations of the research and presents final conclusions, further offering insights for future research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Mass Tourism

2.1.1 Defining Mass Tourism

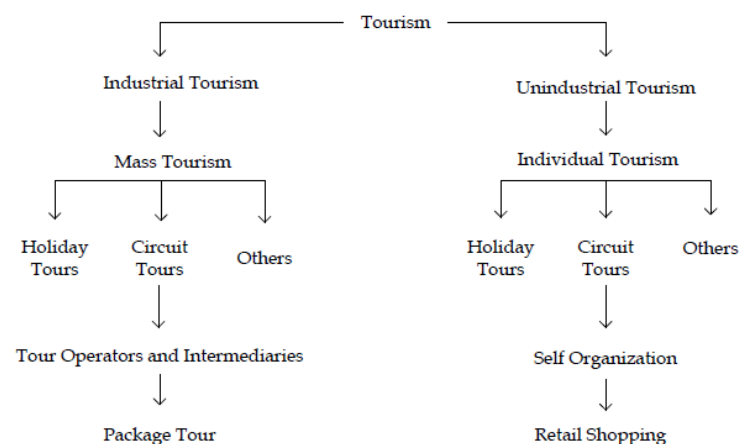
Mass tourism is defined by Poon (1993) as the large-scale movement of organised travellers to well-known vacation destinations for leisure. Similarly, Sezgin and Yolal (2012) argue that the term is used “for pre-scheduled tours for groups of people who travel together with similar purposes (recreation, sightseeing, etc.) usually under the organization of tourism professionals.” (p. 73). This phenomenon can be linked to two main factors: standardised package products and mass consumption. Within the larger frame of international tourism, mass tourism represents the prevailing paradigm and is a significant driver of economic growth.

The concept of mass tourism, however, lacks a universally accepted definition. The reason behind this can be found in its multidimensional nature, which can convey different meanings to different individuals (Torress, 2002; Miller and Auyong, 1998; Pearce, 1992; cited in Vainikka, 2013). Contrasting the lack of clarity around the term’s definition is the absolute cruciality of adopting a specific definition to avoid serious implications for the development of the research itself. Indeed, the meaning given to mass tourism can vary the perception of the phenomenon itself, being homogeneous or heterogeneous, static or dynamic. Vainikka (2013) identifies two primary schools of interpretation of the term, through two different discourses, the deterministic and flexible discourse, respectively reflecting the past and current context. Indeed, to remain conceptually updated and relevant, the concept of mass tourism must be redefined to align with contemporary demands. As a result, scholars are compelled to acknowledge the dynamic and evolving nature of this phenomenon and reconsider their understanding of mass, whether as a homogeneous or heterogeneous entity.

The deterministic discourse is grounded on the idea of a homogeneous mass. It identifies mass tourism as a distinct phenomenon with its own rules and constraints

that impact consumption. In other words, mass tourism is seen as a distinct category of tourism, distinguishable from other forms due to its connection with mass production, mass consumption, and large-scale tourist destinations. This perspective is reflected in historical notions, which define mass tourism as an inherently uniform phenomenon, reinforcing its static nature. Referring to Poon's (1993) definition, he asserts that mass tourism exists only when holidays are "standardized" and "rigidly packaged" and marketed to an "undifferentiated clientele" while being "consumed *en masse*" by tourists without regard for local customs or culture. According to the author, the mass is not merely a quantitative concept but also reflects the intrinsic qualitative characteristics. Within the deterministic discourse, thus, the shift in tourism trend towards more flexible and individualised travel experiences represents a movement away from mass tourism, which is then replaced by what he terms "new tourism" (Poon, 1994) rather than "new mass tourism". This leads to the fundamental understanding of mass tourism in the deterministic discourse as inherently a static and homogeneous phenomenon. Sezgin and Yolal's (2012) analysis of the development of mass tourism represents a clear exemplification of the deterministic discourse's understanding. According to them, mass tourism is the opposite of individual tourism, and one can further visually see these fixed lines within the definition of mass tourism in their conceptual map (*figure 1*). Furthermore, they see the expansion of the global distribution system as the leading force for the end of mass tourism and the beginning of individualised tourism.

Figure 1. *Mass Tourism and Individual Tourism in the Deterministic Discourse*



Source: Sezgin and Yolal (2012, p. 74)

In the deterministic discourse, mass tourism production is associated with Fordism, characterised by large-scale operations controlled by tour operators. It is criticised for turning the product - the package tour - into a rigid and inexpensive offering with a fixed itinerary. The essence of mass tourism is considered culturally shallow and commodified due to the nature of the production and the product itself, which leads to the homogenisation and standardisation of tourist experiences, diminishing individualism. Furthermore, within this understanding of mass tourism, tour operators are often perceived as playing a protective role, shielding tourists from unfamiliar experiences (Boorstin, 1964; Poon, 1993; Turner and Ash, 1975; cited in Vainikka, 2013).

On the other hand, the flexible discourse opens the way to alternative and complementary interpretations of the phenomenon, and reflects different understandings of the concept of mass, enabling the discharge of the idea of clear universal laws. Thus, it highlights the various possibilities and complexities within the paradigm of mass tourism. Mass tourism functions as a loose umbrella term.

In the flexible discourse, mass tourism is viewed as a multidimensional combination of various widespread and large-scale tourism segments, each with unique characteristics. All tourists can be considered part of mass tourism, as they contribute to this widespread leisure trend (Sharpley, 2000; cited in Vainikka, 2013). Mass tourism is also seen as evolving into global “mega-tourism” (Wheeler, 2003; cited in Vainikka, 2013). This discourse focuses on the concept of mass as a quantitative term that describes, among other things, the percentage of the population that travels, the scale of tourist movements, or the sharp rise in demand for international travel. Mass tourism is interpreted as not being limited to a single form of consumption, production, or destination. This means that mass tourism does not have to be uniform, as different types of tourism combine in various ways to create it. Mass tourism is a term given to several kinds of tourism, and these together represent the mass. The phenomenon of mass tourism stands out from its surroundings, whether this refers to the concentration of tourists in a specific place, the direction of tourist movement between countries, or an increased presence in

media coverage, but the mass is not necessarily homogeneous. In the flexible discourse, organisation and consumption do not have a deterministic relationship.

In today's world, tourism demand and supply are inevitably independent, individual, active, and flexible. For this reason, one can decide whether to consider it the end of mass tourism or simply switch to a more comprehensive definition of the phenomenon, adopting a flexible discourse and acknowledging today's environment as a leading force in creating multiple forms of mass tourism. For the analysis carried out in this work, we follow this second understanding; the work follows the definition of mass tourism under the knowledge of the flexible discourse.

2.1.2 History and Development of Mass Tourism

Rather than a recent development, tourism is a longstanding phenomenon that has evolved over centuries; its origins can be traced back to the earliest civilisations. Initially, travel was a privilege reserved for the aristocracy, who had both the time and financial means to explore different places. Over time, tourism expanded beyond the elite, turning into a mainstream activity, including the masses. Two fundamental aspects of tourism's historical development are continuity and change. Meaning that, while tourism has consistently played a role in leisure activities for certain social classes, it has also evolved significantly over time, reflecting its dynamic and ever-changing nature (Page, 2012).

Page (2012) thoroughly explores the evolution of tourism and mass tourism, specifically. Tourism began taking shape in classical times, expanded during the Renaissance, and gained further prominence in the 18th century with the Grand Tour. Between 1750 and 1840, coastal destinations and bathing culture became popular among the aristocracy as social and leisure activities.

The origins of mass tourism can be traced back to the 1851 Great Exhibition, which marked the early rise of package holidays. The event attracted six million visitors to London, many of whom booked organised travel and accommodation

through travel clubs or pioneering agents like Thomas Cook, who facilitated journeys for 165,000 excursionists. Sezgin and Yolal (2012) note that the consumers' homogeneous demand resulted in the creation of standardised products designed to appeal to a broad, uniform market. Similarly, Urry (1990) argues that since many tourists had similar preferences, the tourism industry developed standardised offerings, making use of mass production techniques. This surge in tourism coincided with the rapid expansion of the railway network, further enabling accessibility and organised travel. A few years after the Great Exhibition in London, Thomas Cook launched his first tours to America in 1866, and passenger cruises along the River Nile in the 1880s. During the same period, other entrepreneurs, such as Henry Lunn, introduced organised travel packages for skiing in Switzerland. The upper and middle classes increasingly participated in international tours and domestic trips to coastal resorts.

The First World War marked a significant disruption in the steady expansion of leisure travel. However, in its immediate aftermath, demand for coastal holidays surged, and new modes of travel began to take shape. By the 1930s, nations began recognising tourism as an economic force. Among the most notable innovations of the era was the holiday camp, a mass-market vacation concept centred around the low-income market that thrived both in the interwar period and the years following the Second World War.

The second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century could be more accurately described as the “infancy period” of mass tourism (Sezgin and Yolal, 2012). This classification aligns with the perspective of other authors, with some referring to the years 1800 to 1944 as the “mobility era” (Cook, Yale, & Marqua, 2006), and others referring to the years 1880 to 1950 as the “post-Cook period” highlighting Thomas Cook's role in shaping the travel industry by applying technologies and principles from the Industrial Revolution (Weaver and Lawton, 2014).

The actual emergence of mass tourism as a transformative force can be traced back to the post-war era, with its golden age occurring between the 1950s and 1980s (Sezgin and Yolal, 2012). Many of today's key tourism trends originated during this

period, driven by a surge in holiday demand. Rising incomes, increased leisure time, and expanding opportunities for international travel fuelled this growth. A pivotal milestone came in the 1950s with the advent of jet airlines, revolutionising long-distance travel and making global destinations more accessible. The large-scale development of many coastal areas accelerated in the 1950s, particularly in Spain and Italy; this further enabled the rise of the package holiday, fuelling the rapid expansion of Mediterranean resorts. Tour operators and all-inclusive holiday packages were key defining features of European mass tourism during its golden age.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, tourism products and experiences diversified significantly, and international travel expanded its global reach. While the western Mediterranean coastline remains the most striking example of mass tourism concentration, new destinations such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Israel have gained prominence. Eastern Europe has also emerged as a developing region, with Croatia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Turkey increasingly recognised as key mass tourism markets.

Advancements in air travel, particularly the rise of charter flights, have made long-haul destinations more accessible, popularising locations such as Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Maldives, and Mauritius. However, the evolution of international tourism, alongside shifting consumer behaviours and expectations, has transformed the nature and scope of mass tourism. Today's travellers seek a broader array of experiences, from new recreational activities to more diverse travel products. As a result, new destinations have emerged, attracting organised tourists not only to large resorts but also to small historic cities, urban attractions, and rural areas (Naumov and Green, 2015).

To summarise, the development of mass tourism in the second half of the 20th century was driven by a combination of socio-economic changes, both natural and man-made. One of the most significant factors was increased economic capacity, as rising living standards and greater disposable income allowed more people to afford leisure travel. The introduction and expansion of paid holidays further reinforced this trend, giving workers more time off to travel. Meanwhile, advancements in transportation, particularly the expansion of railway networks and the proliferation

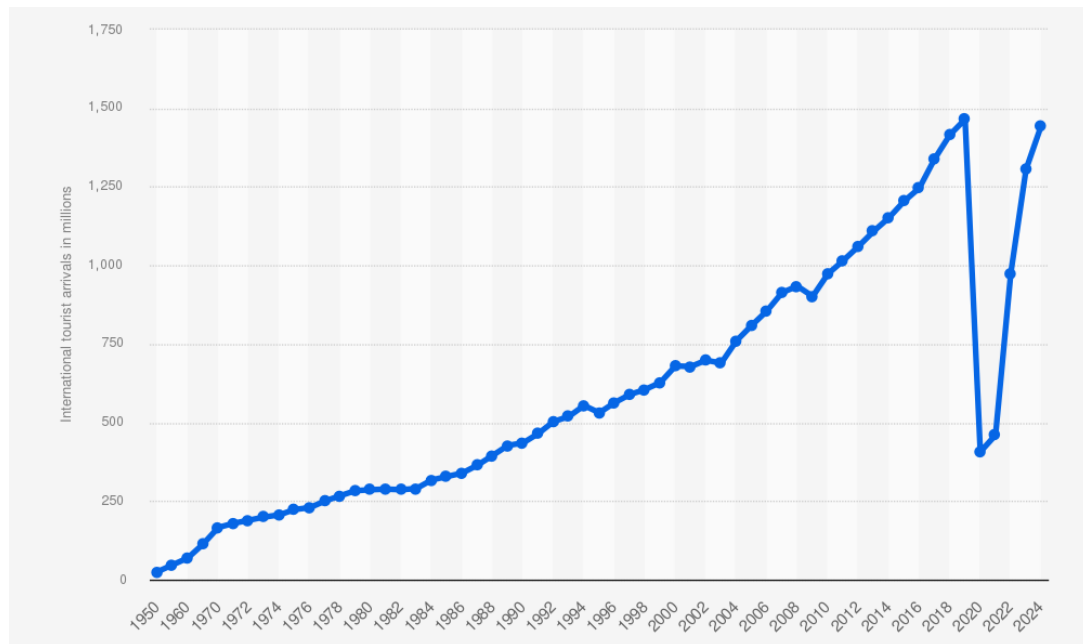
of high-speed trains and larger, more efficient aircraft, made travel faster, more convenient, and increasingly affordable.

Purpose-built resorts, spas, and holiday camps emerged to accommodate the growing number of tourists, alongside new forms of holiday accommodation, including timeshares, and later in the 21st century, home-sharing platforms like Airbnb. Tour operators played a crucial role in shaping mass tourism by simplifying international travel through package holidays, which bundled flights, transfers, and accommodations. Their influence, combined with the rise of budget airlines, made overseas vacations accessible to a much wider audience.

Another key factor was the rise in personal mobility and the increasing internationalisation of modern societies (Bramwell, 2004; Manera, Segreto and Pohl, 2009; cited in Naumov and Green, 2015). In parallel, the availability of travel information expanded significantly, evolving from traditional media, brochures, and guidebooks to digital platforms. Today, social media is a significant tourism driver, inspiring people to explore new destinations. Gay (2024) associates the effect of social media on tourism with what he refers to as “egotourism”. With the widespread use of smartphones and social networking platforms, self-presentation has become a central focus. The difference from the past lies in scale rather than nature; what has changed is the way this phenomenon spreads, which is now driven by the immediacy and ease of sharing images on social media. Among these platforms, Instagram is frequently associated with the expansion of mega-mass tourism.

All the above is reflected by data, applied in *Figure 2* to graphically illustrate the exponential growth of tourism since World War II. According to the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism), the number of international tourists stood at 25 million in 1950 and had multiplied by ten by 1977. This figure rose to 500 million by 1992, reached 1 billion in 2011, and peaked at 1.46 billion in 2019, just before the outbreak of the pandemic.

Figure 2. *Number of International Tourist Arrivals Worldwide from 1950 to 2024 (in millions)*



Source: *World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) adapted by Statista 2024*

2.1.3 Impacts of Mass Tourism

Mass tourism is a global phenomenon with positive and negative implications. While it generates significant profits, it also incurs considerable costs; these two can be unevenly distributed. Tourism creates employment and generates infrastructure and foreign currency; however, the social, environmental, and cultural costs are often at the expense of the local communities (Duterme, 2007).

A clear reminder of how vital tourism is to the global economy and many national and regional economies arrived in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis put tens of millions of jobs at risk, leaving entire destinations and sectors severely affected, if not wholly devastated (Gay, 2024). Empirical data further supports this claim, as the direct, indirect, and induced impact of travel and tourism (T&T) in 2023 contributed USD 9.9 trillion to global Gross Domestic Product (GDP),

9.1% of global GDP and supported 329.6 million jobs, 10% of global employment (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2024).

The BBC also reports, “For places such as the Caribbean, tourism is their main source of income”. Given this assertion, it is essential to critically assess its validity, scope, and depth, a task for which Page (2012) provides valuable insight.

According to Page (2012), most international travellers come from developed regions such as Europe, North America, and Australasia, as well as from the emerging middle class in various developing countries. In many instances, these tourists visit destinations where the local population often lives at a subsistence level or experiences a significantly lower standard of living compared to the visitors. The significant disparity in wealth between tourists and locals highlights a clear economic imbalance, as those with disposable income can afford the luxury of travel, while many tourism industry workers are employed in low-wage, unskilled positions. The increasing effects of globalisation further exacerbate this inequality. Globalisation is closely tied to the expansion of large international corporations that influence economic development and production on a global scale. These companies operate from their home countries while reducing costs by utilising low operating expenses and inexpensive labour in developing nations. The tourism industry follows a similar pattern, with major multinational hotel chains and tour operators establishing their businesses using the destinations as the foundation of their tourist offerings. However, in such cases, connections between tourism and the local economy remain weak, as low-skilled jobs with minimal economic benefits are offset by profits that are funnelled back to the home countries of these multinational firms, also referred to as export leakage.

Shifting away from the managerial focus of this research, it is worth considering Gay’s (2024) comparison of the current state of tourism with colonisation. He rhetorically asks, “Is it not a renewed form of exploitation of the dominated by the dominant, a sly recolonisation, with Indigenous servants and tourists seen as new settlers? [...]” and goes on, “[...] The host society seems to be no more than an instrument for the use of foreign international companies [...]” (p. 9). Specifically, package tourism is criticised for generating only minimal benefits

for local economies, as much of the revenue flows back to the main organisation. Some even argue that tourism generates visible activity without fostering long-term, meaningful economic growth or development (Gay, 2024).

In many developing nations, the limited integration of tourism into the local economy creates a dependence on these foreign corporations, as they often lack the domestic capital and entrepreneurial capacity to establish their own tourism enterprises. A shortage of education, expertise, and bargaining power further hinders local communities from negotiating better terms with multinational companies, leading to a form of tourism that can be exploitative rather than beneficial (Page, 2012).

It is important to note that in the previous paragraph, Page (2012) analyses the economic impact of mass tourism, specifically focusing on the exchange of wealthy tourists from developed countries to developing nations. This provides a specific context, emphasising the financial disparity between tourists and local populations. However, it is important to consider that tourism also involves the movement of people from developed countries to other developed nations, where the impacts differ. In such cases, the dynamics of tourism change, leading to varying effects.

Another crucial aspect of researching the impact of mass tourism is its socio-cultural effects, which often have harmful consequences. These include cultural degradation, the commercialisation of traditions through staged experiences, and the excessive exploitation of cultural heritage for tourism (Page, 2012). On the same level of analysis, Gay (2024) discusses that while tourism is often seen as a means of fostering connections between people, it also creates various forms of separation. These divisions, shaped by preconceived notions, highlight the complexity of interactions between groups with different languages, values, religions, traditions, and customs. Rather than naturally bridging these differences, if not managed well, tourism can sometimes deepen them.

Mass tourism is often criticised for its numerous negative environmental impacts that are generated when the destination's carrying capacity limit is breached. Among the impacts on the natural and physical environment are overcrowding, air, water and land pollution, scarcity of water, depletion of natural resources, and

excessive waste (Poon, 1993; Manglik, 2023). Furthermore, a rising concern in many tourist destinations worldwide is that while tourism continues to expand and profits are extracted, little investment is made in preserving the very environmental assets that attract visitors, such as beaches, wildlife, and cultural or architectural heritage, leading to their potential degradation.

2.2 Overtourism

Among the impacts of mass tourism, it is possible to identify a specific phenomenon, overtourism, which can be seen as an extreme consequence or particular outcome of mass tourism, specifically when tourism numbers grow beyond sustainable levels.

Although the term overtourism is not entirely new, its popularity has increased exponentially in recent times. Indeed, it gained significant attention in the second half of the 2010s, emerging as a key concept in discussions on tourism's impact. According to Goodwin (2019), the term was first introduced in 2008 in a scientific publication, *Integrated coastal zone management in Vietnam* (An et al., 2008; cited in Goodwin, 2019). The hashtag #overtourism was first used on Twitter in 2012. However, it was not until 2017, following extensive media coverage of anti-tourism protests in major urban destinations, that overtourism became widely recognised and debated.

UN Tourism (2018, p. 4) defines overtourism as “the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors experiences in a negative way”. Along the same line, Goodwin (2019, p. 110) adds that “[...] It is the opposite of responsible tourism which is about using tourism to make better places to live in and better places to visit. Often both visitors and guests experience the deterioration concurrently and rebel against it.” The author specifies that the word is often used by both locals and travellers, as it reflects their perception that the quality of life for residents and the visitor experience has worsened. Hospers (2019) further argues that overtourism is largely a matter of perception, making it a relative rather than absolute phenomenon.

Whether tourism negatively affects locals or visitors depends on various factors, including the size of the city, the location of key attractions, and the perceived density of tourists. In Doxey's (1975) 'irritation index', a model that illustrates how residents' attitudes towards tourists evolve throughout a destination's tourism lifecycle, overtourism relates to when the number of visitors surpasses a certain threshold, hence making the local sentiment shift from irritation to open hostility, ultimately fostering resentment toward tourists. The term is, indeed, often associated mainly with the impact on the host side. However, most definitions also include the side of the guest, as their experience is affected too.

An increasing number of European and non-European cities are experiencing the negative consequences of mass tourism. This issue affects not only major capitals such as Berlin, Copenhagen, Rome, Lisbon, Prague, Amsterdam, and Barcelona but smaller cities with strong tourist appeal. Overtourism has become a pressing concern due to the simultaneous rise in global tourism demand and the challenges faced by local stakeholders in managing its impacts (Hospers, 2019).

2.2.1 Driving Force Behind Overtourism

Dodds and Butler (2019) propose a valuable framework that identifies three key categories of factors contributing to overtourism: agents of growth, technology, and power. The first category, agents of growth, encompasses factors that drive the increasing number of tourists. In addition to experienced travellers engaging in more frequent trips and "a high propensity to consumer travel" (Goodwin, 2019, p. 111), new groups of visitors have also emerged. The role of technology in enabling overtourism is particularly evident. Advancements in transport and communication technologies have been significant, leading to simplified booking and travel processes, the expansion of cost-effective travel options such as low-cost airlines and cruise tourism, and the widespread promotion of destinations through social media. Individuals facing limitations of holiday time and pay tend to opt for city breaks, often taking multiple short-haul flights per year. The third category, power, refers to

the short-term economic focus and growth-oriented mindset of local stakeholders, as well as the lack of consensus among them on strategies to manage the rising influx of tourists. Representative of the authors' proposed framework is the sentence by Hospers (2019, p. 21), "The emergence of Porto as a must-see destination is mainly due to technological factors: without Ryanair, easyJet and Instagram it would be less popular." The phenomenon of overtourism is inherently driven by the constant pursuit of growth, and this growth is pursued without acknowledging its limitations. As a result, it stands in direct contrast to the fundamental values at the core of responsible tourism (Goodwin, 2019).

Goodwin (2019) also identifies another potential factor contributing to overtourism, which is partially linked to the third category proposed by Dodds and Butler: the difficulty of demarketing highly popular tourist sites. Travellers are often drawn to these iconic locations, and destination marketers, whose success is measured by the number of visitor arrivals, continue to promote these heavily visited attractions to meet their targets, further exacerbating overcrowding. It should also be considered that the issue behind mass tourism and its mitigation, as Higgins-Desbiolles refers to it, is a "wicked problem". This term signifies a problem that is challenging to solve due to its complexity, interconnected factors, and differing perspectives and stakeholders' interests. Powerful groups – corporations, governments, and consumers - tend to resist necessary changes.

Finally, inevitably, the causes of mass tourism and overtourism overlap significantly, as both stem from the same mechanisms, and are so intrinsically linked to one another, with one being a structural component of the other. The intersection between these two concepts highlights the importance of addressing them together and understanding their connection. While mass tourism conceptualises the tourism industry's growth, overtourism represents the escalation of the impacts on a destination.

2.2.2 Challenges of Overtourism

Hospers (2019) examines the specific challenges posed by overtourism, highlighting the economic, social, and environmental impacts that may arise when visitor numbers exceed sustainable levels (Van Gorp et al., 2019; cited in Hospers, 2019). Firstly, overtourism can give rise to economic challenges associated with Hardin's (1968) Tragedy of the Commons. The key attractions of popular tourist destinations function as shared and largely unregulated resources, making them susceptible to excessive use. In this context, tourists can be considered 'free riders' since their collective presence, while benefiting from these resources, ultimately contributes to their depletion. The same can be said for tour companies (Goodwin, 2019). Consequently, an excessive number of visitors places significant strain on urban infrastructure, increases pollution, and generates other undesirable externalities, with the financial and social burden falling primarily on residents. Overtourism may lead to a decline in the quality of life for local communities. In some cases, residents express feelings of alienation, stating that they no longer feel at home in their own city (Hospers, 2019). Thirdly, overtourism can also result in significant physical damage to urban environments. This impact can manifest in various ways, including the deterioration of historical sites, architectural heritage, and natural ecosystems.

2.2.3 Contrast Measures

Although this research does not focus on the measures used to address overtourism, it is important to acknowledge that strategies and policies aimed at managing overtourism represent a significant area of analysis within tourism studies. However, their scope is extremely broad and varies depending on the specific context. For instance, the measures implemented to mitigate overtourism in European capitals differ from those applied in developing countries or at specific overcrowded tourist sites. As previously discussed, these strategies are highly context-dependent and tailored to the unique challenges of each destination. Attempting to categorise them

without a well-defined framework would be misleading and beyond the scope of this research. Additionally, the role of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) is closely intertwined with the development and implementation of overtourism management strategies. However, as this study focuses on a specific stakeholder group and selected organisations, the role of DMOs falls outside its scope. Furthermore, if on one side the implementation of contrasting measures of the negative impacts caused by mass tourism and, specifically overtourism, fall under the responsibility of DMOs, the research does not focus on the concept of minimising the impacts of mass tourism, but it aims to analyse the way to a paradigm shift from within through organisations operating under the principles of responsible tourism.

2.3 Sustainable Tourism

2.3.1 An Introduction to Sustainable Tourism

Environmental issues have become a central concern in many societies due to the increasing awareness of matters such as pollution and loss of biodiversity, and their expected worsening in the long run. Hence, the public discourse on these challenges has intensified, with a growing sense of urgency among many to take action. In this context, Gay (2024) introduces the concept of sustainable tourism in connection to the environmental implications of mass tourism. The discussion surrounding the negative environmental effects of mass tourism has primarily focused on identifying alternative approaches that align with the principles of sustainable development. However, according to the author, alternative approaches could be thought of as unlikely or relatively unfeasible to attain on a large scale.

Following the emergence of the concept of sustainable development, the 1987 Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, commissioned by the United Nations, laid the foundation for integrating sustainability into various sectors. Since the early 1990s, conventional tourism-related corporations and organisations have formally incorporated the vocabulary of sustainability into their frameworks (Gay, 2024). This

growing institutionalisation is exemplified by the creation of the Sustainable Development of Tourism Department within the UNWTO, the introduction of the *Blueprint for New Tourism* manifesto by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), and the explicit emphasis on sustainability within the UNEP Tourism Programme (Weaver, 2014). In 1993, the World Tourism Organization introduced the notion of “sustainable tourism development”, further reinforced by the Charter for Sustainable Tourism, which sought to establish new ethical guidelines for the industry (Gay, 2024).

However, the implementation of these principles has been slow, challenging, and limited in scope. Although alternative forms of tourism, interpreted as an alternative to mass tourism, have emerged, their overall supply remains marginal compared to the rapid and continuous growth of global tourist flows. Weaver (2007) suggests that the tourism sector’s commitment to sustainability remains both limited in scope and applied superficially. The lack of breadth is evident in the fact that only a handful of major corporations have embraced sustainability initiatives. At the same time, certain stakeholders, such as travel agencies, remain relatively less involved. Furthermore, the sector’s engagement lacks depth as it focuses on isolated measures like recycling, reducing energy consumption and few restricted practices rather than adopting a more comprehensive approach to sustainability. Large corporations, including major hotel chains, have also embraced sustainability initiatives. However, doubts persist regarding the authenticity of their commitments and the true intentions behind their actions. In some cases, corporations are adopting sustainability measures on a micro level, representing cost savings, such as through energy-efficient devices, waste reduction, and minimising water usage. Furthermore, these efforts appear to serve primarily as a marketing strategy to cultivate a socially responsible image, resembling greenwashing (Gay, 2024).

According to the UN Tourism, sustainable tourism refers to “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. The definition is relatively vague, with blurred borders, and open to being framed within different contexts. Hence, Buckley (2009) argues that while the

term sustainable tourism is widely used, it remains poorly defined. The author suggests that it refers to tourism that aligns with the principles of sustainable development, a concept that is also often vague and debated. Buckley also points out that sustainable tourism is generally associated with addressing the primary environmental concerns of tourism.

Indeed, the concept of sustainable tourism has primarily been associated with the environmental dimension, both in academic literature and the media. For instance, Weaver (2007) emphasises that ensuring tourism's long-term ecological and environmental sustainability depends on minimising its negative impacts. Gay (2024) offers an insightful perspective on the role of the media, arguing that in the tourism sector, ecologically sustainable practices often receive disproportionate attention.

2.3.2 Alternative Forms of Tourism

The challenges posed by mass tourism, ranging from social and cultural disruptions to environmental concerns, have led to increased interest in alternative tourism as a way to move beyond the conventional tourism model. This approach seeks to redefine tourism by prioritising meaningful interactions with local communities and adopting a different philosophical perspective (De Kadt, 1990; cited in Theng, 2015). Alternative tourism, a term commonly used in tourism literature, refers to models diverging from mass or mainstream tourism. It encompasses niche markets and travel experiences not typically promoted or distributed by traditional travel agencies. This broad category includes various forms such as ecotourism, responsible tourism, fair tourism, and ethical tourism, among others. These alternative approaches provide opportunities to step away from the dominant mass tourism paradigm and embrace more sustainable and community-focused experiences.

Among the emerging alternative forms of tourism, ecotourism, a subcategory of sustainable tourism (UNWTO, 2002), refers to responsible travel to natural areas that prioritise environmental conservation and the well-being of local communities (Gay, 2024). Lequin (2001, p. 12) describes the focus of this form of tourism as being

“[...] oriented towards relatively undeveloped natural areas and protection of territories opposed to mass tourism operating in the built environment”. Therefore, the primary aim of ecotourism is to manage visitor numbers and regulate the consumption of natural resources, ensuring the conservation of these resources (Theng, 2015). Indeed, according to Bricker and Kariithi (2025, 3.3.1 *Prioritize The Conservation Of The Natural Environment section*) “nature-based tourism is fully reliant on a healthy ecosystem, whereby the integrity of the ecosystem is maintained as part of a quality tourism experience.” Over time, the concept of ecotourism has shifted to place greater emphasis on the human aspect, particularly focusing on cultural heritage and community involvement. This shift has helped facilitate the inclusion of local communities in sustainable initiatives. As highlighted by Lequin (2001), ecotourism is viewed as a form of tourism that should have minimal impact on both the physical and cultural environment, integrating conservation efforts and emphasising the sustainable development of local communities while preserving natural resources.

Other alternative forms of tourism less commonly discussed in the literature, or included under the umbrella term of sustainable tourism, are solidarity tourism, which fosters meaningful interactions and mutual support between visitors and host communities, and fair tourism, establishing partnerships between tourism operators and local populations and ensuring shared responsibility in developing and managing travel experiences (Gay, 2024).

Additionally, according to Gay (2024), responsible tourism entails a voluntary commitment by industry stakeholders to uphold social and environmental responsibility in their activities. Tour operators engaged in responsible development, particularly those operating in developing countries, place great importance on managing water, energy resources and waste, ensuring fair treatment of employees and local communities, and promoting the fair distribution of tourism revenues. The Italian Association for Responsible Tourism (2005) adopts the following definition of responsible tourism, “Responsible tourism complies with the principles of social and economic justice and exerts full respect for environments and cultures. It recognises the centrality of the local host community and its right to act as a protagonist in developing sustainable and responsible tourism on its land.

Responsible tourism actuates fostering of positive interaction among the tourist industry, the local communities and the travellers.”

On the other hand, Buckley (2009) finds the term usage being limited in size and mainly tied to social considerations. It is, indeed, important to note that, unlike sustainable development and sustainable tourism, the theoretical and societal foundations of responsible tourism have received comparatively less attention. One possible explanation for this limited interest is the widespread assumption that responsibility and sustainability are essentially the same. However, although there are connections between the two, the emergence and function of responsibility in tourism production and consumption are shaped by academic debates and societal processes that are distinct from those surrounding sustainable development (Saarinen, 2021).

Additionally, while Gay’s (2024) definition of responsible tourism emphasises the role of industry stakeholders in managing their operations, this alternative form of tourism tends to be centred around the concept of the “responsible tourist” through, for instance, this can be seen in the UN Tourism’s “Global Code of Ethics for Tourism”. Furthermore, Schönherr (2024) conducted a bibliometric and thematic analysis, which revealed that the majority of research on responsible tourism focuses on the responsibility of tourists, while comparatively minor investigation has been conducted on tourism businesses, and only recently has the role of destination management started to receive attention for the academics.

The core debate surrounding sustainable tourism as a concept and responsible tourism as its practical implementation revolves around the connection between responsible behaviour and sustainability. Mohamadi et al. (2022) assert that achieving sustainability in tourism destinations is not possible without incorporating responsible tourism. Without a strong emphasis on responsible practices, both from tourists and industry stakeholders, efforts to promote sustainable tourism will be ineffective. Responsible tourism represents an innovative approach that enhances the well-being of local communities, generates social and economic benefits, and safeguards natural resources within tourism destinations. Moreover, it focuses on the ethical conduct of individuals and organisations in the tourism sector, ensuring that their actions align with sustainability goals. Mohamadi et al. (2022) present the

agreed-upon definition of responsible tourism encompassing all forms of tourism that prioritise the well-being of host communities and the preservation of their natural, cultural, and built environments, also taking into account the interests of diverse stakeholder groups.

It is, however, important to note how ecotourism has been criticised for fostering exclusivity, raising concerns about the unequal accessibility of travel. It often caters to high-end accommodations and affluent travellers, failing to meet the growing demand for vacations from a broader population segment. Rather than offering a true alternative, it is seen by Gay (2024), as a niche market expansion targeting consumers who are receptive to anti-mass tourism narratives and eager to differentiate themselves from mainstream travellers. According to Deprest (1997), if tourism is regarded as a mass consumption phenomenon, then alternative forms such as green tourism, ecotourism, and cultural tourism appear to be mere variations that the tourism industry quickly adopts to appeal to an increasingly diverse customer base. Similarly, according to Gay (2024), while mass tourism is criticised by advocates of alternative tourism, the latter fails to address the fundamental issues of visitor numbers and the right to mobility. Hence, alternative tourism remains a niche market that appeals to travellers who prioritise local experiences, deeper engagement with destinations, slower travel pace, authenticity, and small-scale accommodations. Thus, as introduced earlier, the author argues that this approach does not provide a viable solution to the long-term sustainability challenges of the tourism industry.

Building on his previous observations, the author further argues that while mass tourism has long been a prevalent social phenomenon, it is increasingly being leveraged to promote newer forms of tourism, such as ecotourism. “[...] Even the most popular destinations are trying to differentiate themselves from mass tourism, without trying to reduce their numbers. Social, solidarity-based, fair, responsible, ethical, ecological, sustainable tourism, etc., seem to have become almost miraculous solutions for a number of tourism institutions and professionals.” (p. 149). Additionally, Knafo (2023) suggests that the discourse against overtourism is increasingly being used as a strategy to attract tourists to certain less popular areas or products. Furthermore, Knowles (2004) highlights that the term ecotourism is often used merely as a marketing tool by the tourism industry. He further argues that

ecotourism is frequently promoted as a growth strategy, without necessarily limiting or replacing mass tourism.

Finally, different theoretical perspectives on mass tourism influence how alternative forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, are understood. Some view ecotourism as the antithesis of mass tourism (Walpole and Goodwin, 2000), while others consider it a variation of it (Weaver, 2001; cited in Vainikka, 2013). In many instances, the relationship between the two remains ambiguous (Collins-Kreiner and Israeli, 2010; cited in Vainikka, 2013). In a deterministic discourse, ecotourism - seen as being locally oriented, economically sustainable, and non-commercial - is positioned as the opposite of mass tourism. On the other hand, in a flexible discourse, ecotourism can be perceived as a subset of mass tourism rather than a distinct alternative, given that travellers frequently rely on the same core infrastructure, including major airlines, mass-produced transportation, etc. (Weaver, 2001; cited in Vainikka, 2013).

2.3.3 The 2030 Agenda

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This framework consists of 17 goals and 169 specific targets, providing a roadmap for governments, civil society, and the private sector to align their efforts and assess their impact on sustainable development leading up to 2030 (Tourism for SDGs, n.d.). The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines the Sustainable Development Goals, intending to end poverty, protect the environment, and promote prosperity for all by 2030 as part of a broader sustainable development strategy. Given the UN Tourism's focus on sustainable tourism and the industry's economic importance, both the SDGs and the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have become central to examining tourism's role in sustainable development and its long-term viability (Christie and Sharma, 2008; Saarinen, Rogerson, & Manwa, 2011; Saarinen and Rogerson, 2014; cited in Hall, 2019). However, despite

its significance, tourism is only mentioned few times in the UN's 2030 Agenda, specifically in relation to natural resource management and conservation, job creation, the promotion of local culture and products, and the sustainable use of marine resources to enhance economic benefits for small island developing states and least developed countries.

Indeed, tourism is addressed in three SDGs: SDG 8 (“Decent work and economic growth”), SDG 12 (“Responsible consumption and production”), and SDG 14 (“Life below water”). Within the 2030 Agenda, SDG target 8.9 sets the objective to “by 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.” According to UN Tourism, responsible tourism management can unlock the sector’s potential to drive job creation, particularly benefiting vulnerable groups, support rural development, encourage economic diversification through the tourism value chain, foster cultural awareness and inclusivity, and help preserve local traditions. The significance of sustainable tourism is further reinforced in SDG target 12.b, which calls to “develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.” UN Tourism also emphasises that for the sector to contribute meaningfully to sustainability, it must embrace sustainable consumption and production (SCP) practices. This requires identifying key intervention points within the tourism value chain to optimise natural resource use and minimise environmental impacts caused by tourism-related production and consumption. Finally, as outlined in SDG target 14.7, tourism can represent the tool to “by 2030, increase the economic benefits to Small Island developing States and least developed countries”. UN Tourism highlights that integrating tourism development into the management of these regions is crucial for conserving fragile marine ecosystems. By doing so, tourism can serve as a driver of the blue economy, ensuring the sustainable use of marine resources while supporting economic and environmental resilience. Although tourism is explicitly mentioned in only three SDGs, it plays a vital role and is interconnected with all 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

The Rio+20 outcome document (2012), *The Future We Want*, dedicates two paragraphs to sustainable tourism. In paragraph 130, sustainable tourism is

highlighted as a significant contributor to sustainable development across its economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This recognition stems from tourism's strong connections to various sectors, its capacity to generate decent employment and its role in creating trade opportunities. As a result, Member States acknowledge "the need to support sustainable tourism activities and relevant capacity-building that promote environmental awareness, conserve and protect the environment, respect wildlife, flora, biodiversity, ecosystems and cultural diversity, and improve the welfare and livelihoods of local communities by supporting their local economies and the human and natural environment as a whole." (p. 25). Furthermore, the Member States in paragraph 131 "encourage the promotion of investment in sustainable tourism, including eco-tourism and cultural tourism, which may include creating small- and medium-sized enterprises and facilitating access to finance, including through microcredit initiatives for the poor, indigenous peoples and local communities in areas with high eco-tourism potential". Member States also "underline the importance of establishing, where necessary, appropriate guidelines and regulations in accordance with national priorities and legislation for promoting and supporting sustainable tourism." (p. 25).

The UNWTO – UNDP (2017) *Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals – Journey to 2030* report, in-depth discusses how to fully embrace sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda the tourism sector must incorporate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at every level of its operations. This means that the implementation of the SDGs occurs on two primary fronts: the public domain and the private domain. In the public domain, governments and international organisations play a crucial role in shaping policies, regulations, and frameworks that guide the tourism industry toward sustainability. Public entities are responsible for setting standards, creating incentives, and monitoring progress to ensure that tourism development aligns with the SDGs. This alignment means that countries must adopt public policies that support the global objectives outlined in the 2030 Agenda, effectively integrating tourism governance with SDGs. On the other hand, the private sector, consisting of businesses, tourism operators, and other stakeholders, also holds significant responsibility. The private domain involves the active participation of industry players who must adopt sustainable practices and integrate sustainability into

their business models. They are responsible for ensuring that their operations support the social, environmental, and economic well-being of the destinations in which they operate. By aligning their strategies with sustainable development goals, private companies can drive positive change while also achieving long-term profitability. This balance is critical to ensure that tourism remains economically viable while also benefiting the environment and local communities.

Indeed, a crucial aspect to consider in the journey toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 is the role of enhanced competitiveness, recognised as a key success factor (Ruhanen, 2007; cited in Hall, 2019), along with the significant contribution of the private sector. The involvement of businesses and corporations is essential in translating sustainability goals into tangible economic benefits, demonstrating that sustainability and competitiveness are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing. The crucial role of the private sector in advancing the 2030 Agenda is evident in the words of former World Tourism Organization Secretary-General Rifai, who states, “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 [SDGs] sets the path that we all must embrace. [...] the private sector, which is the key player in tourism, it is beginning to recognise that the SDGs offer true business opportunities as sustainable business operations can spur competitiveness and increase profit.” (UNWTO-UNDP, 2017, pp. 6–7). Similarly, UNDP Administrator Steiner underscores the financial and strategic imperatives of sustainability within the tourism industry, emphasising that “The role of the private sector and access to financing are paramount to building a more sustainable tourism sector. Long-term competitiveness depends on the willingness to manage industry vulnerabilities and invest in new markets and services such as ecotourism [...]” (UNWTO-UNDP, 2017, p. 9).

Chapter 3. Theoretical Settings

Growing awareness of the environmental damage caused by unsustainable economic development models has led to the widespread adoption of sustainable practices in many industries. A key catalyst for this shift has been the 2030 Agenda (Bebbington and Unerman, 2018; cited in Rosato et al., 2021), which, as discussed in *Section 2.3.3*, is highly relevant to the tourism sector, although tourism per se is not frequently mentioned across the seventeen SDGs. To explore the academic response to the introduction of the 2030 Agenda, Rosato et al. (2021), in their study *2030 Agenda and Sustainable Business Models in Tourism*, examine the scientific discourse that emerged in the first five years following the introduction of the agenda, from 2015 to 2020. Through a bibliometric analysis of 101 articles on the relationship between Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and tourism, the authors identified three main thematic clusters within the literature on sustainable tourism.

Additionally, the authors highlight key concerns raised in previous research. One of the primary criticisms of tourism remains its impact on natural resources, which is linked to the increasing implementation of sustainable business models. Specifically, scholars have increasingly focused on the challenges tourism enterprises face in transitioning to more sustainable models (Boluk et al., 2019; Gössling and Michael Hall, 2019; Niäiä et al., 2010; cited in Rosato et al., 2021). More broadly, the findings from these studies have contributed to a growing body of knowledge examining the intersection between the SDGs as a political-economic framework and the role of the private sector in achieving these goals (Scheyvens et al., 2016).

The first cluster identified by the authors encompasses studies that examine sustainable tourism from a managerial perspective, particularly analysing the implications for private enterprises of transitioning toward more sustainable business models. Many of these studies build upon the framework established by the World Tourism Organization (2017) concerning the SDGs. A notable theoretical contribution within this cluster is Hall's (2019) critical analysis, which scrutinises the challenges and critiques associated with developing sustainable practices in the tourism sector. A key focus of this cluster is the risks posed by climate change,

highlighting the importance of implementing sustainable business models to mitigate the negative externalities resulting from tourism activities in natural areas. Hence, the literature in this cluster focuses on offering valuable insights into managing climate-related risks, with a predominant emphasis on the environmental dimension of sustainability.

The second cluster consists of research that evaluates the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and multinational enterprises (MNEs) in the tourism industry. Studies within this cluster advocate for a broader understanding of sustainable development, arguing that it should extend beyond merely mitigating environmental risks to encompass a multidimensional approach. Alarcón and Cole (2019) emphasise that tourism enterprises to achieve a truly sustainable model, they have to integrate additional socio-economic factors into their sustainability strategies. The third cluster includes studies that explore various and specific sustainable tourism models. For instance, Scheyvens and Hughes (2019) provide a critical analysis of how tourism can contribute to achieving SDG 1 (No Poverty), emphasising its potential to generate positive externalities that enhance the well-being of local communities. Similarly, Winchenbach et al. (2019) highlight the role of tourism enterprises and regulatory bodies in supporting SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), reinforcing the necessity of aligning business models with sustainable development goals. However, the literature often discusses the significant challenges that the transition to more sustainable tourism models presents. Musavengane (2019), as cited in Rosato et al. (2020), examines the discrepancies between enterprises' commitments to sustainability and their actual implementation of sustainable practices, while Nguyen et al. (2019), as cited in Rosato et al. (2020), argue that successfully implementing SDG-oriented strategies requires the active involvement of external stakeholders.

Collectively, these findings underscore the focus on the complex yet essential role of tourism enterprises in advancing sustainability, emphasising the need for integrated, multi-stakeholder approaches to achieve meaningful progress toward the SDGs. A significant body of literature supports the argument that tourism enterprises can actively contribute to sustainable development. Hence, achieving the SDGs requires active participation from the private sector (Scheyvens et al., 2016). In

particular, scholars have investigated the economic determinants influencing firms' decisions to adopt environmentally sustainable practices (Bramwell et al., 2017).

Finally, from a managerial perspective, among other scholars, Rosato et al. (2021) focus on how adopting sustainable practices can enhance a firm's competitive advantage. Their findings suggest that transitioning to sustainable business models not only aligns with ethical and environmental considerations but also generates positive externalities that contribute to long-term value creation. Hence, according to the authors, sustainability is a strategic opportunity to drive innovation and economic growth within the tourism industry.

3.1 Stakeholders Involved in Sustainable Tourism

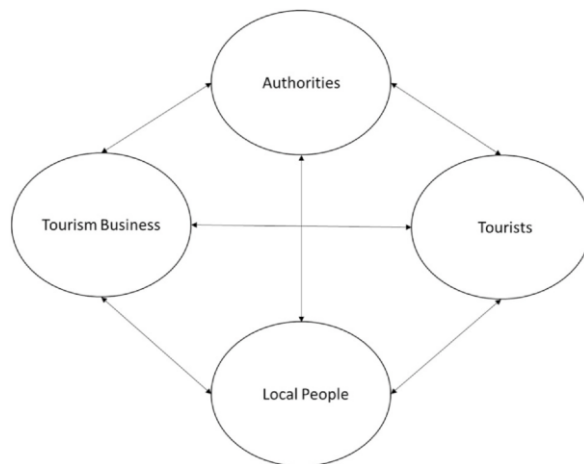
The tourism industry functions as a system composed of multiple interconnected elements. Consequently, it is argued by Roxas et al. (2020) that achieving sustainability necessitates effective coordination among various stakeholders, such as government authorities, tourists, tourism businesses, and local communities. In alignment with the UN Tourism 2030 Roadmap for Inclusive Growth, Sustainable Development Goal 17 emphasises the importance of fostering strong partnerships and collaboration among stakeholders.

Behind the need for collaboration between stakeholders is the concept of governance, which, as observed by Kooiman (1993) and Pierre (2005) (cited in Roxas et al., 2020), reflects a transformation in the role of government, shifting towards a more inclusive model where non-governmental actors play an increasingly significant role in achieving shared objectives between public and private entities. Hence, governance shifts from being an exclusive function of the state to a more distributed process involving multiple stakeholders (Stoker, 1998; cited in Roxas et al., 2020). Within the discourse on sustainable tourism, attention has extended beyond the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework proposed by Elkington (1997) – which focuses on people, planet, and profit, highlighting not only the economic value organisations create, but also the social and environmental value they add or destroy

(Elkington, 2004) - to emphasise the crucial role of stakeholder engagement. A broad body of literature (Björk, 2000; Fennell and Malloy, 1999; Miller and Twining-Ward, 2005; as cited in Roxas et al., 2020) has identified key stakeholders in the tourism sector, including tourists, businesses, local communities, government authorities, non-governmental organisations, and others.

Roxas et al. (2020), based on the identification of these numerous stakeholders involved in the tourism sector, introduce a five-point framework for tourism stakeholders, aiming to translate sustainable tourism principles into practice by systematically defining stakeholder roles in tourism governance. This model provides a structured approach to understanding how different actors can align their efforts to maximize synergies and capitalize on the benefits of collaboration. This is particularly relevant due to the intermediary role tour operators specifically play. In formulating their framework, Roxas et al. (2020) build upon Björk's (2000) work (see *Fig. 3*), which emphasizes the necessity of cooperative engagement among key stakeholders, including governmental bodies, tourists, businesses, and local communities.

Figure 3. *Björk's Central Actors Framework*

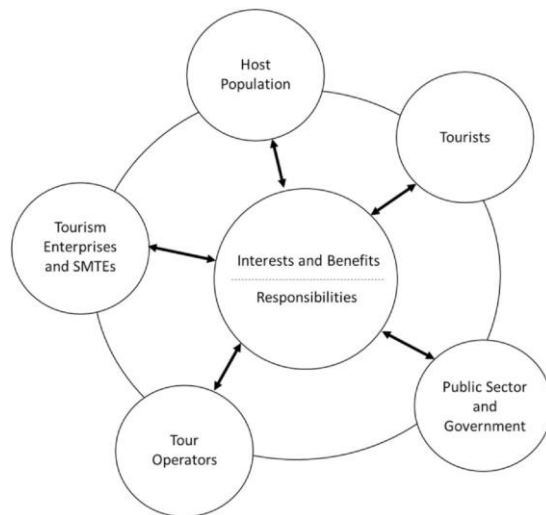


Source: *Bjork (2000); adapted by Roxas et al. (2020)*

Expanding on the framework illustrated in *Figure 3*, the authors also draw upon the work of Buhalis and Fletcher (1995), who introduced the concept of a dynamic wheel of tourism stakeholders. Their model emphasises the significance of stakeholder relationships in achieving shared objectives (see *Fig. 4*). This model highlights the

necessity of incorporating the perspectives, expectations, and interests of various actors into tourism strategies to ensure effective and sustainable development.

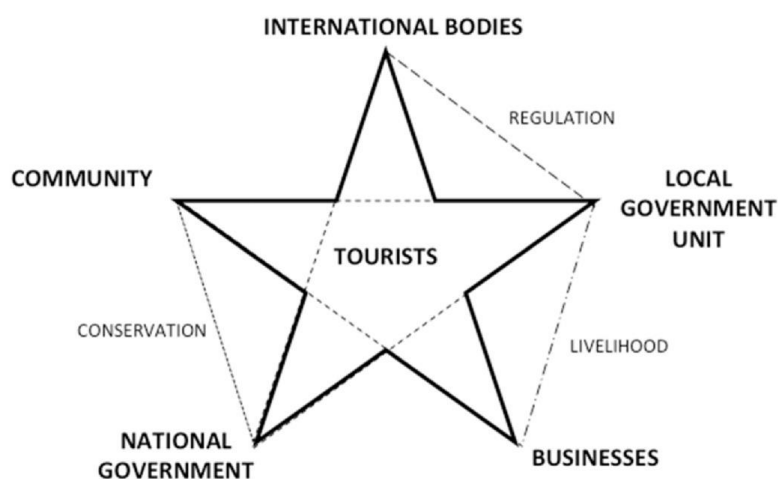
Figure 4. *Dynamic Wheel of Tourism Stakeholders by Buhalis and Fletcher*



Source: *Buhalis and Fletcher (1995); adapted by Roxas et al. (2020)*

Ultimately, the five-point framework proposed by Roxas et al. (2020) takes the form of a star, symbolising the key stakeholders who must actively fulfil their roles. This model underscores the necessity of collaboration and engagement among these actors to effectively achieve sustainable tourism (see *Fig. 5*).

Figure 5. *Roxas et al.'s Tourism Stakeholders' Framework*



Source: *Roxas et al. (2020, p. 391)*

If on one hand, since the tourism industry operates as a systemic network, achieving sustainability requires a multilateral approach and strong coordination among its stakeholders, as Scheyvens et al. (2016) emphasise, the private sector plays an essential role in advancing the SDGs and driving the transition of the tourism industry. While the interconnections between different actors remain fundamental, this analysis focuses primarily on businesses operating within the industry, as they play a key role in shaping its sustainability trajectory. Indeed, the central role of tourism enterprises stems from their significant impact on the landscapes in which they operate. Unlike previous initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations has explicitly called on the private sector to integrate sustainability into its market strategies. In this context, scholars and policymakers have increasingly debated the challenges that tourism businesses face in adopting sustainable business models, such as those based on the circular economy (Rosato et al., 2021). To facilitate this transition, various initiatives have been introduced in recent years to support and promote the adoption of more sustainable business practices within the private sector operating in the tourism industry (UNWTO, 2019a, 2019b). Specifically, tour operators - responsible for designing and managing pre-planned travel packages (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2006; cited in Hamid et al., 2021) - are encouraged to integrate sustainable tourism practices based on their distinct functions within the industry (Hamid et al., 2021).

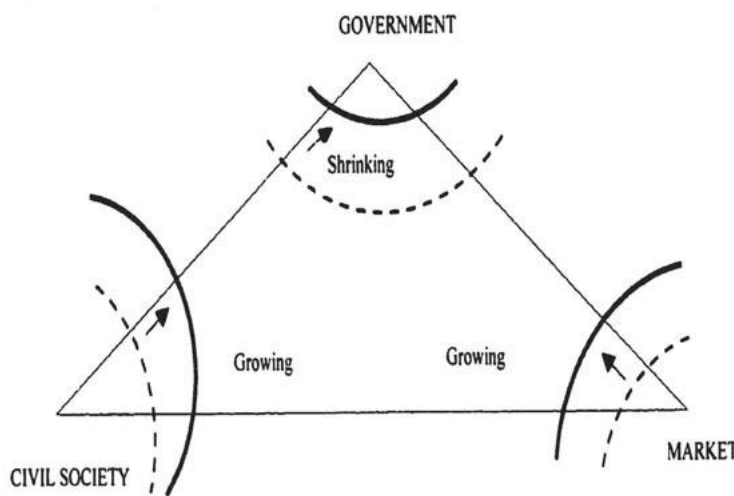
3.1.1 Civil Society Organisations in Sustainable Tourism

As seen in the section above, the involvement of different stakeholders is essential in developing sustainable tourism. Among them, civil society organisations as a whole can play a significant role. The civil society category encompasses various types of associative organisations, such as non-governmental organisations, voluntary organisations, non-profit entities, charitable foundations, and benevolent societies (Genc, 2015). The classification of civil society organisations within the Italian legislative framework can, to a certain extent, be compared to what are referred to as

“third sector organisations” (translated from the Italian term “*organizzazioni di terzo settore*”), which essentially represent private, non-profit entities.

According to Genc (2015) and as pictured in *Figure 6*, the government, the civil society and the market are interrelated, but while the effect of the governmental actions is shrinking, the impact of the other stakeholders on sustainable tourism development is growing. This showcases the increasingly important role civil society organisations play in the field of sustainable tourism.

Figure 6. *Growing Impact of Civil Society Organisations*



Source: *Seth and Deepti (1999); cited in Genc (2015)*

Although NGOs are a subset of CSOs, the non-governmental organisation classification can be used by part of the literature as a shorthand to refer to a wider range of civil society organisations, hence while different authors discussed the role of NGOs on sustainable tourism development, none specifically analyses and refers to the one of non-profit associations. Furthermore, given that technically these two non-profit forms share several principles, in the current analysis, we frame the term NGO in a broader sense.

Khan (2015, p. 530) defines NGOs as “voluntary organizations that are funded by the state, foundations, business or private persons”. According to Genc (2015, p. 114), “the main characteristic of the NGO is that it is private in its form, has a public character and a non-profit orientation in its objectives and activities”. They are drivers of social change and play a critical and awareness-raising role towards the

institutions, other organisations and society. NGOs generate awareness among the masses of the sustainable use of resources and guide the development process toward more responsible practices (Khan, 2015). Non-governmental organisations play an essential role in sustainable tourism development through various activities. Beyond simply raising awareness, they conduct valuable research, advocate for ethical trade practices, and hold businesses accountable. Thanks to their strong ties to local communities, NGOs are often able to gather and share information much faster than government agencies. Additionally, NGOs are key in promoting civic accountability, offering expert advice, and building strong partnerships by fostering resource sharing, collaboration, and active involvement (Jepson, 2005; cited in Genc, 2015). NGOs promote tourism development that enhances the interaction between tourists and local communities, with particular attention to the consequences of human actions on the environment and the local economy (Wearing, 2001; cited in Genc, 2015). They are actively involved in supporting sustainable tourism by promoting ethical and responsible practices. Additionally, they support communities in developing countries and remote areas through targeted projects, adopting alternative models that offer new perspectives on the potential of tourism.

3.2 Tour Operators and Sustainable Tourism

As introduced in *Chapter 1, Section 1.2.3*, tour operators play a central role in the tourism system, acting as the intermediary between tourists and destinations, and working closely with all other tourism industry stakeholders, offering inbound and outbound services (Hamid et al., 2021). Therefore, they are crucial in promoting and achieving more sustainable tourism forms (Khairat and Maher, 2012). This is reflected in several studies suggesting that tour operators play a central role in promoting more sustainable tourism practices (Swarbrooke, 1999; Frey and George, 2010; Wijk and Persoon, 2006; as cited in Khairat and Maher, 2012). Due to their key role in distribution and ability to guide tourists to various destinations and service providers, tour operators have a significant impact on fostering and advancing sustainable tourism development (Sigala, 2008). Sigala (2008) also emphasises that tour operators are crucial in shifting behaviours and attitudes towards more

responsible tourism, as they can significantly impact the scale and direction of tourist flows, shape the attitudes and practices of various tourism suppliers and stakeholders, and generate incremental effects due to their typically large size.

As consistently discussed in the literature discourse, Khairat and Maher (2012) note, too, that there has been a notable rise in public awareness regarding the environmental consequences of tourism and the unsustainable use of natural resources. This growing consciousness is reflected in the increasing demand for holiday experiences that are both environmentally and culturally responsible. Consequently, many tourists expect sustainability to be a key component of their travel choices, which, according to Font and Cochrane (2005), means that tour operators must integrate sustainability into their operations to remain competitive. Sigala (2008) highlights the importance for tour operators to recognise their role and responsibility in promoting tourism sustainability due to the significant impacts linked to their core business, particularly mass tourism. This involves creating standardised, low-cost tourism packages that attract large numbers of tourists to popular destinations (Yarcan and Çetin, 2021). In the past, tour operators often overlooked their environmental and social responsibilities, claiming that as intermediaries between travellers and tourism service providers, the responsibility for the impacts on destinations lay with subcontracted suppliers or local authorities. While it is true that responsibilities are shared among stakeholders, most tour operators now recognise that, as intermediaries working closely with both tourists and service providers, the responsibility lies with them (Budeanu, 2005; Swarbrooke, 1999; Cochrane, 2006; Font and Cochrane, 2005a; cited in Khairat and Maher, 2012).

As a result of tour operators increasingly recognising their responsibility for the negative effects of tourism, given their role in determining tourist destinations and the services used by travellers (Tour Operators Initiative (TOI), 2002; Budeanu, 2005; cited in Khairat and Maher, 2012), they have shifted towards a more proactive approach, developing environmental policies and strategies to mitigate these impacts. In response to this, numerous international organisations, industry associations, and government bodies have begun to assess the role of tour operators and evaluate their current efforts to minimise the negative consequences of their operations. To address

this, tour operators have launched various initiatives aimed at evaluating their impacts and improving their overall performance (Budeanu, 2005).

Furthermore, several international initiatives have been introduced by non-governmental organisations and tour operators to enhance sustainability in the tourism sector (Wijk and Persoon, 2006). Among these, a particularly significant one is the Tour Operators Initiative (TOI), which was launched in 2000 (in 2014 merged with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council) with the support of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Tourism Organization (WTO). The goal of this initiative was to encourage tour operators globally to commit to sustainable development, integrating environmental, cultural, and social considerations into the design, operation, and overall conduct of their tours and business practices (Khairat and Maher, 2012).

Finally, tour operators are increasingly adopting sustainable tourism practices, and they are also collaborating through collective initiatives to promote and implement methods that align with sustainable development goals (TOI, 2005; Mason, 2003; cited in Khairat and Maher, 2012). Furthermore, adopting sustainable tourism practices is said to provide tour operators with a competitive business advantage (Hamid et al., 2021).

3.2.1 Implementation of Sustainable Practices

Khairat and Maher (2012) conducted a study aimed at analysing the practical implementation of sustainability practices among tour operators' businesses. The research had three key objectives: to identify the areas considered most critical for sustainable practices implementation; to determine the primary drivers that incentivise tour operators to adopt more responsible strategies; and to examine both the benefits and challenges associated with integrating sustainability into their operations. Mason (2003) highlights that the tour operator sector is often criticised for its negative environmental and social impacts. However, on the other hand, as previously discussed, large-scale tour operators, due to their significant economic

influence, are considered well-positioned to drive sustainable transformations across the tourism industry. Given this perspective, the authors' study focuses on large-scale tour operators that have integrated sustainability practices into their business models. As highlighted by Font and Cochrane (2005), there are five areas in a tour operator business into which sustainability practices can be integrated. These include internal management, product development, supply chain management, customer relations and cooperation with the destination. Spasić (2012) further discusses these areas of implementation of the principles of sustainable tourism.

Internal management encompasses all the operations and activities conducted internally by the tour operator, such as the management of human resources and the operational processes within the tour operator's organisational structure. Product development refers to the processes involved in selecting destinations and assembling holiday packages that aim to reduce environmental, economic, and social impacts (Miller and Twining-Ward, 2005; cited in Khairat and Maher, 2012). Moreover, according to Font and Cochrane (2005), product management includes evaluating the various components of a tour, such as accommodation, transportation, and activities, to assess their potential environmental, social, and economic effects. The goal is to mitigate negative impacts while enhancing positive outcomes for the environment, local communities, and the destination's long-term economy.

Supply Chain Management, as defined by Zhang et al. (2009, p. 345), refers to "a network of tourism organizations involved in various activities, from the supply side to the distribution and marketing of the final tourism product; it includes a wide array of participants from both the private and public sectors." Spasić (2012, p. 61), defines the supply chain management area as the one including "the process of procurement and contracting with suppliers, with the use of criteria based on the sustainable tourism development as the basic principle." In the context of tour operators, most components of a holiday package are provided by subcontracted suppliers. Consequently, the selection of service providers and the terms of their contracts present significant opportunities to influence the sustainability of the offerings. The primary objective of Supply Chain Management is to manage products and services throughout the full life cycle of a holiday package, intending to create

packages that minimise environmental and social impacts (Budeanu, 2009; Font et al., 2008; Miller and Twining-Ward, 2005; cited in Khairat and Maher, 2012).

Lastly, Khairat and Maher (2012) identify two additional areas where sustainability practices can be integrated: customer relations and cooperation with destinations. In terms of customer relations, tour operators are uniquely positioned to encourage and guide responsible behaviour among their customers. Cooperation with destinations involves efforts by tour operators to influence the sustainability of destinations by protecting their cultural, economic, and environmental assets, while also maximising benefits for local communities. This can be achieved through the establishment and strengthening of relationships and partnerships with key stakeholders in the destination, including the private sector, local communities, local authorities, and non-governmental organisations. Furthermore, in this regard, numerous studies emphasise that involving local communities is essential for achieving sustainable tourism. Bramwell and Lane (2011) argue that the active participation of destination communities in tourism planning and governance plays a crucial role in fostering sustainability. This perspective aligns with Murphy's (1985) community-based tourism model, which underscores the importance of local engagement in tourism development.

The results of the authors' study (Khairat and Maher, 2012) indicate that the area of Supply Chain Management holds the highest priority for implementation among tour operators. Furthermore, an interesting finding of the authors' study is represented by the positive attitude towards incorporating sustainability practices into tour operator businesses, deriving from two main factors: "Building a Positive Public Image" and "Responding to Customer Demands". This suggests that although large tour operators have already begun taking steps toward sustainability, they have limited real motivation to adopt more sustainable practices. Additionally, the main benefits of implementing sustainability practices reported by tour operators include, increased operational efficiency and business opportunities (through design innovation), competitive advantage, and improved corporate image. Finally, the study concludes that while the principles of sustainable tourism offer clear benefits, implementing them within tour operator businesses remains a difficult task. This is due to a significant gap between strategy and actual implementation.

Furthermore, as Spasić (2012) argues, it is important to note that while sustainable tourism is expected to bring positive economic benefits to local communities, these benefits are often not fully realisable. Indeed, tour operators argue that one reason for this is the constraints imposed by the 1992 EU Directive on Package Travel². The directive sets regulations to protect consumers booking package holidays, requiring tour operators to ensure a standard level of service quality. This reflects on tour operators having limited flexibility in choosing local providers, as they must prioritise those that meet strict quality and financial security standards. Smaller, local businesses may struggle to comply with these standards, making it harder for them to be included in package tours. Therefore, according to the author, this may lead tour operators to rely more on larger, established suppliers, thus reducing the direct economic impact of tour operators' activity on local communities. In essence, while the goal is to provide high-quality and secure travel experiences, the directive's requirements may unintentionally limit opportunities for local economies to benefit from tourism.

3.2.2 Sustainable Supply Chain Management

For tour operators, implementing sustainable tourism means considering environmental, social, and economic factors at every stage of planning and delivering travel experiences. A key aspect of this approach is incorporating sustainability into the supply chain by carefully selecting and contracting service providers. This allows tour operators to maintain greater control over the quality of services offered while ensuring responsible business practices. Although integrating sustainability into the supply chain presents challenges, successful cases demonstrate that a well-structured management system and strong, long-term collaboration with service providers produce positive results (Spasić, 2012).

A considerable body of literature explores the implementation of sustainable Supply Chain Management (SCM). As discussed in *Section 3.1*, the strong interdependence among stakeholders in the tourism industry makes collaboration

² The 1992 EU Directive on Package Travel was subsequently replaced by Directive (EU) 2015/2302

between firms essential. With growing awareness and demand for sustainable tourism, firms must adopt sustainable SCM strategies; simultaneously, research on this topic has gained increasing attention in the academic environment. While Spasić (2012) analyses the challenges tour operators face when trying to implement the concept of sustainable development in managing the supply chain, Sigala (2008) highlights the relevance of applying sustainable SCM principles to tour operators, demonstrating how sustainability can be effectively integrated into tourism supply chains. Additionally, both authors analyse the real-life implementation of sustainable SCM, through the case study of the world's major tour operator, TUI.

Sustainable Supply Chain Management can be understood in two ways, as a process-oriented approach that oversees the sourcing, production, and delivery of goods and services to consumers, or more broadly, as the coordination of different entities within the same supply chain. According to the author, sustainable SCM within tour operator businesses encompasses several key aspects to take into consideration. First, it applies to all stages of the supply chain, but in the context of tourism, it is important to recognise that production and consumption occur simultaneously at the destination. Second, it takes into account environmental, socio-cultural, and economic factors that influence tourism sustainability. Third, it includes a reverse logistics system that facilitates continuous feedback, learning, and improvement. Ultimately, sustainable SCM relies on the joint development and coordination of activities among all stakeholders within the supply chain.

The primary and original function of tour operators consist of purchasing products in bulk, such as accommodation, transportation, and activities, combining them into tour packages, and selling them at a bundled price that is lower than the sum of the individual components. According to Sigala (2008), this practice is essential for the survival of small and medium-sized tourism suppliers (SMTS), as these businesses often lack the resources and capabilities to market and distribute their services independently. Beyond their economic role, tour operators can also contribute to local economic development by promoting regional products and businesses. By strategically managing distribution channels, such as travel agencies and representatives, they can ensure a fairer allocation of tourists across different regions and local service providers. Additionally, tour operators can shape tourism

flows by directing visitor activities across both local and international destinations, thereby balancing demand and reducing pressure on specific areas. Furthermore, tour operators have the capacity to drive sustainability efforts among suppliers by encouraging the adoption of sustainable practices. Finally, acting as key facilitators, they should foster collaboration among stakeholders, such as local governments, private enterprises, local communities, and NGOs. By building strong relationships and aligning diverse interests, tour operators can help create a unified approach to sustainable tourism and establish shared sustainability goals.

According to the authors, TUI showcases a strong commitment to sustainable Supply Chain Management, which is demonstrated by various initiatives spanning across all stages of its supply chain. The company follows two main strategies to achieve sustainable SCM: first, mitigating risks in the global supply chain by ensuring that all tourism suppliers and stakeholders involved in its products adhere to sustainable practices; second, embedding sustainability into its products by ensuring they meet environmental and social standards. To uphold sustainability benchmarks, TUI, for instance, prioritises compliance with ISO 14001, a widely recognised environmental management standard. Additionally, the company fosters environmental transparency through the TUI Environmental Network (TEN!). Supplier evaluation is another key aspect of TUI's strategy, sustainability criteria are integrated into supplier contracts, and hoteliers are required to submit annual checklists detailing their environmental protection efforts. Preference is given to suppliers who achieve sustainability targets, reinforcing the company's commitment to environmentally sustainable tourism.

Furthermore, according to Spasić (2012), tour operators face significant challenges when implementing sustainable development principles in their supply chains. One of the main obstacles is that they do not have direct control over most of the services and products included in their packages. Even for the core components of a package deal, ensuring the required service quality and integrating sustainability standards can be difficult. Since tour operators typically do not own transportation or accommodation facilities, they must rely on contracts with external suppliers. This reliance makes close collaboration with service providers essential throughout all

stages of itinerary planning and execution. When designing travel experiences, tour operators must also consider that the application of sustainable tourism practices varies significantly between source markets and destination countries, especially when the latter have lower levels of economic development. In such cases, fostering stronger and more frequent cooperation with suppliers becomes necessary, often requiring on-site visits and precise service quality agreements. Additionally, in many destinations, collaboration with the public sector is essential for developing sustainable infrastructure, such as waste recycling systems, wastewater treatment, and eco-friendly public transportation (Sekulovic and Unkovic, 2010; cited in Spasić, 2012).

3.2.3 Increased Organisational Performance through the Implementation of Sustainable Practices

Authors discuss the economic effects of the implementation of sustainable practices in the operations of tour operators. Spasić (2012), finds that immediate economic benefits are primarily seen in cost savings. However, an even more significant impact comes from the enhancement of service quality and the ability to offer unique experiences, which increase customer satisfaction and encourage repeat bookings. Strengthening customer loyalty and appealing to new market segments contribute to long-term economic gains. Additionally, positive outcomes include building stronger and more lasting partnerships with business collaborators at the destination.

Building on this perspective, Hamid et al. (2021) contribute to the existing literature by exploring the relationship between sustainable tourism practices and the business performance of tour operators. The authors specifically investigate how sustainable business management (SBM) and sustainable destination management (SDM) impact the business performance of tour operators. This interdisciplinary study bridges the fields of tourism and business management, integrating the

framework for adopting sustainable tourism practices (Dibra, 2014; Le et al., 2006; cited in Hamid et al., 2021) with the business performance model.

In this study, sustainable business management is defined as the ability of a firm to maintain its operations by addressing financial needs, while sustainable destination management refers to a firm's capacity to support a destination by focusing on the use of local resources and respecting the expectations of the destination's stakeholders. The study also considers sustainable business performance, which is assessed from economic, social, and environmental perspectives (Kafa et al., 2013; Yang, 2013; cited in Hamid et al., 2021). Indeed, adopting the triple bottom line approach, briefly described in *Section 3.1*, requires organisations to expand their focus from economic performance alone to include environmental and social dimensions of sustainability (Pagell, Wu, & Wasserman, 2010; Yang, 2013; cited in Hamid et al., 2021). By simultaneously addressing these three areas, economic, environmental, and social, organisations can gain a competitive edge, helping them outperform competitors and attract target customers (Barney, 1991; Mason-Jones, Naylor, & Towill, 2000; cited in Hamid et al., 2021). Thus, the significance of sustainability performance can be measured through these three key perspectives.

Finally, the study's results show a positive relationship between the adoption of both sustainable business management and sustainable destination management practices and improved business performance. Furthermore, these findings align with the work of Zailani et al. (2015), which also demonstrated a positive connection between sustainable tourism practices and business performance. As such, this research reinforces the academic discourse that integrating sustainable tourism practices is a potentially effective strategy for enhancing business outcomes for tour operators.

With a sector-specific focus on small- and medium-sized enterprises, Moore and Manring (2009) further suggest that adopting sustainable practices can offer small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) a competitive edge in multiple ways. Firstly, SMEs that prioritise sustainability are more likely to appeal to larger corporations seeking investment opportunities aligned with their own values.

Secondly, these businesses can stand out by targeting niche markets that are often less accessible to large companies. Lastly, forming partnerships with other sustainability-focused firms fosters collaboration, leading to greater efficiency in resource management and overall operational improvements. In this way, sustainability not only strengthens a company's position in the market but also contributes to its long-term resilience.

3.3 Add-on Sustainability Strategies or Sustainability as a Core Value?

The Travel Foundation (2020) developed a guide to help tourism businesses integrate sustainable practices into their operations. Recognising the challenge of balancing financial goals, such as sales growth and profitability, with the need to protect the environment, preserve cultural heritage, and distribute tourism benefits more fairly, the guide offers straightforward and practical approaches to adopting sustainability in the industry. The guide outlines two distinct approaches to incorporating sustainability in tourism businesses. The first, known as the “add-on” approach, involves treating sustainability as a separate initiative, with a dedicated team, independent programs, and a distinct strategy. Many businesses adopting this model implement initiatives such as appointing sustainability champions, organising volunteer networks, supporting charities, engaging in local community projects, and offering a selection of environmentally friendly products. However, in this approach, sustainability remains an additional effort rather than an integral part of the business.

The second approach, which aligns more closely with the guide's recommendations, focuses on embedding sustainability into the core of the business. While this process can be challenging and time-consuming, the guide emphasises that it is the most effective path for companies aiming to achieve true sustainability. A business's core strategy determines its direction, product offerings, market focus, partnerships, risk management, and performance metrics, all of which also influence its social, environmental, and economic impact. The guide advocates for integrating sustainability across all aspects of the business and throughout the value chain. It highlights the importance of analysing the company's business model to identify

where sustainability can be embedded and leveraged to create greater overall value, not just financial, but also social and environmental.

On a technical level, the guide recommends beginning with a detailed mapping of the business model. This process helps businesses better understand the resources they depend on, as well as the environmental and social impacts they generate. This analysis may reveal numerous sustainability challenges that need to be addressed. The next step is to prioritise these challenges by identifying the most critical risks associated, those that significantly affect the business and where the company has the strongest ability to drive meaningful change. Furthermore, the guide presents two examples to illustrate how sustainability priorities can vary between businesses, taking into consideration two types of tour operators. Outbound tour operators, which send travellers abroad and depend on local ground agents, focus their sustainability efforts on areas where they have the most control, such as ensuring experiences adhere to responsible tourism standards. However, while they acknowledge the environmental impact of aviation emissions, their ability to influence this aspect is limited. On the other hand, inbound tour operators, which manage tourism within a specific destination, prioritise strengthening local supply chains to ensure tourism revenue benefits the community. With greater influence over local businesses, they implement long-term strategies to improve the quality of local tourism services and promote sustainable initiatives. While both types of operators integrate sustainability into their business models, their focus areas differ based on their level of control and impact.

This second approach, outlined in the guide, aligns more closely with the focus of this research. However, as discussed in the introductory section, the guide developed by the Travel Foundation primarily examines businesses that integrate sustainability into their business models, whether as an additional component or as a fundamental aspect of their operations, implying a translation from a BM to an SBM. In contrast, this study adopts a paradigm-shifting perspective, arguing that sustainability, and its three dimensions, should not merely be integrated into pre-existing business structures but should instead constitute the primary driver, purpose, and foundational mission of the business model itself. Consequently, enterprises that

embody this principle deserve greater scholarly attention and should be positioned at the centre of analytical inquiry. Indeed, rather than asking how sustainability fits within a business, the central inquiry should be how business models can be designed and structured around sustainability as their core principle. While the guide provides a valuable theoretical foundation, further development is necessary to advance this framework. To deepen the analysis background, the following section will explore the theoretical foundations of business models.

3.4 Business Model Theory

Scholars have increasingly examined and discussed business models, exploring how they evolve, drive innovation, and serve as frameworks for identifying, capturing, and measuring value exchange. Although definitions of the term “business model” have been provided by numerous authors, much of the empirical research applying this concept has focused on large organisations. Furthermore, tourism researchers have been relatively reluctant to acknowledge the analytical potential of this framework, particularly in the context of sustainable tourism. Given the advanced academic and practical development of the business model concept, and its ability to shape a firm’s operations and strategic decisions, it is essential that it be applied thoughtfully within tourism studies. The business model is, in fact, a fundamental component of all tourism enterprises, regardless of their size or scope. Therefore, the underlying principles and structure of the business model are considered equally relevant for understanding the operations of small- and medium-sized tourism organisations. As this research demonstrates, applying the business model framework offers valuable insights into how smaller responsible tour operators design their value propositions and incorporate sustainability and responsibility into their operations, while also offering a basis for assessing potential future developments in the industry.

3.4.1 Value Creation, Value Delivery, Value Capture Framework

Teece (2010) suggests that every time a business enterprise is created, it adopts a specific business model, either deliberately or unintentionally. Over the past two decades, various scholars have proposed different definitions of the business model. According to Kaplan (2012, p. 18), “A business model is a story about how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value.” Similarly, Teece (2010) argues that a business model defines the structure through which an enterprise creates, delivers, and captures value. It acts as a template for how a company operates, outlining “how an enterprise delivers value to customers, entices customers to pay for value, and converts those payments to profit” (p. 172). In other words, the business model illustrates management’s hypothesis about what customers want, how they prefer to get it, and how the business can effectively meet those needs while ensuring profitability (Coles et al., 2016). A business model, according to Teece (2010), explains the rationale behind a business’s operations and presents data and evidence showing how it generates and delivers value to its customers. Additionally, it defines the structure of revenues, costs, and profits linked to value creation. Ultimately, a business model clarifies the benefit an enterprise provides to customers, the operational structure supporting it, and the method through which the business captures a portion of the value it generates.

Kaplan’s (2012, p. 32) story can be summarised through three key questions reflecting the three business model story elements:

- “How does your organization create value?”
- “How does your organization deliver value?”
- “How does your organization capture value?”

Business models are structured to generate value for customers, making it essential to first consider how and for whom they create that value. Key questions to explore while figuring out the process of value creation, suggested by Kaplan (2012, p. 19), include: “What problem does the business model solve? What unmet market need does it fill? What compelling customer experience does it create? What promise of value do you make to your customers?” Furthermore, one effective way to

understand how a business model generates value is to understand the value from the customers' perspective, by asking: "What job is the customer hiring your company, product, or service to accomplish?" Indeed, innovation expert and Harvard Business School professor Christensen emphasises the significance of deeply understanding the tasks customers need to complete, as this insight should shape the organisation's value proposition. Therefore, as Kaplan (2012) argues, viewing value from the customer's perspective is the most effective approach to generating a powerful value proposition.

Furthermore, Freudenreich et al. (2020) argue that business model concepts often depict value as a one-way flow from businesses to customers, focusing on value creation for customers in return for economic gain for the company. In this view, other stakeholders are frequently overlooked or treated as peripheral. To address this, the authors introduce a stakeholder value creation framework rooted in the principles of stakeholder theory, which emphasises the role of stakeholders as co-creators in collaborative value creation processes. The key distinction, according to the authors, lies in the framing of value creation, while business model thinking tends to ask, "what and how?", stakeholder theory asks, "with and for whom?". This extended understanding of value creation is particularly relevant for the case of responsible tour operators' business models.

The second key element of a business model is value delivery, which, according to Kaplan (2012), refers to how a company fulfils the value it promises to the market. It provides a clear picture of how the organisation operates and is an essential part of describing the company's operating model. An operating model includes the capabilities the company uses to deliver its value proposition to customers. It outlines both the internal capabilities within the organisation and those from external partners that play a role in delivering value to customers. Thus, an operating model shows the core processes of the organisation, illustrating how people, information, and resources move through the business and how external stakeholders help in the value delivery process.

Before introducing the category of value capture, it is important to emphasise that the three dimensions of the business model, hereby discussed, value creation,

value delivery and value capture, should not be understood as rigid or fixed categories. Various scholars offer different interpretations of the components of the business model, often shaped by the disciplinary lens they adopt, such as strategy, technology, and information systems (Shafer et al., 2005). As a result, the business model reveals different dimensions depending on the perspective through which it is viewed. Furthermore, the concept of value within operational strategies is developed by several authors solely through the categories of value creation and value capture (see, for example, Bowman and Ambrosini, 2000; Chesbrough et al., 2018; Sjodin et al., 2019). As Shafer et al. (2005) suggest, value creation and value capture represent two essential functions that every organisation must fulfil to sustain long-term viability.

In line with this perspective, the definition of value delivery proposed by Kaplan (2012), which highlights its key role in the functioning of the organisation's operating model, has, in this research, been included under the category of value creation. This decision is based on the idea that, in the context of responsible tour operators, the operational processes through which value is created, thus including both the organisation's internal capabilities and the role of external stakeholders, are closely tied to the nature of the value itself and to the beneficiaries for whom it is intended.

Accordingly, in this section on value delivery, the research focuses on the strategies for delivering value and managing customer relationships, considering them as integral components of the value delivery process. Caroli (2021) highlights that the way value is delivered affects the net benefit perceived by the customer, as it involves both the way the product or service is made available for the customer and the ability of the organisation to communicate its distinctive features. Distribution and communication channels thus become part of the value itself, as they guide the customer through all stages of interaction with the offering, from awareness, evaluation, and purchase to consumption and post-sale services. Similarly, customer relationship management is crucial not only to understand the customer's expectations and motivations but also to build trust, foster loyalty, and increase the value captured by the organisation over time.

The third component of the business model is value capture. Value capture is defined by Chesbrough et al. (2018, p. 933) as “the process of securing financial or nonfinancial return from value creation.” Sjodin et al. (2019, p. 161), based on this definition, further point out that value capture also includes the process of distributing the profits of value creation “among participating actors such as providers, customers, and partners.” In practical terms, value capture implies the notion that a structured financial model is essential for the success of any business model. This aspect of the business model explains who pays for the value delivered and how much they pay. It describes the company’s profit structure, taking into account the operating costs compared to the revenues, as well as the funds needed to sustain the ongoing organisational operations and growth by financing both working capital and fixed assets (Kaplan, 2012).

Identifying the sources of the company’s income represents the first element of the financial model. Clarifying what the consumer is paying for is just as important as identifying the source of revenue when describing how a business model captures value. Pricing strategies play a key role in how a business model captures value. For instance, a common belief is that it is easier to sell at a lower price than to communicate to the customers the value of a higher price. Following the identification of the company’s revenue sources and pricing strategies, the operating cost side of the financial model needs to be addressed. To do so, Kaplan (2012, p. 31) suggests the following questions: “How much does it cost to deliver the value? What are the cost elements of your business model, and how do they support value delivery? Once operating costs are covered, is there any remaining revenue to reinvest into the business model and scale it for growth? [...]” These three elements, revenues, price, and costs, allow for continuous value creation and delivery.

All three of these components, along with the responses to the questions mentioned above, can be integrated into a unified business model narrative.

Other authors have provided additional definitions of the business model. Afuah (2014, p. 4) describes it as “a framework or recipe for making money - for creating and capturing value”. Zott and Amit (2013), through the term “business ecosystem” (p. 407), argue that value creation depends on the interaction the

organisation has with multiple external parties, thus business models extend beyond the firm. Hence, according to the same authors, the business model represents a “system of interdependent activities performed by a firm and its partners, along with the mechanisms that link them” (p. 404). As per Shafer et al. (2005, p. 202) the business model is “a representation of a firm’s underlying core logic and strategic choices for creating and capturing value within a value network.” Gupta et al. (2024) build upon Shafer et al.’s (2005) definition, emphasising that a business model illustrates how companies generate, deliver, and sustain value. It explains the rationale behind these processes, considering various economic, social, cultural, and contextual factors. The business model captures the essence of a business venture, detailing its strategy for long-term success and financial sustainability. It outlines how key elements such as the value proposition, customer segments, distribution channels, revenue streams, and cost structure, among others, interact with one another. This interconnection forms the foundation for the business’s overall strategy, which helps the organisation achieve its vision and goals.

Teece (2010, p. 189) suggests additional questions to consider when investigating an organisation’s business model. “How does the product or service bring utility to the consumer? [...] What is the ‘deep truth’ about what customers really value and how will the firm’s service/product offering satisfy those needs? What might the customer ‘pay’ for receiving this value? How large is the market? Is the product/service honed to support a mass market? Are there alternative offerings already in the market? How is the offering superior to them? Where is the industry in its evolution? Has a ‘dominant design’ emerged? [...] What are the (contractual) structures needed to combine the activities that must be performed to deliver value to the consumer? [...] What will it cost to provide the product/service? How will those costs behave as volume and other factors change?”

Furthermore, many authors emphasise the concept of value when defining a business model. However, it is important to recognise that different users or stakeholders within business networks can interpret value in various ways. Porter and Kramer (2011) introduce the concept of shared value, which suggests that business practices that enhance a company’s competitiveness can also improve the economic and social conditions of the communities where the company operates. Creating

Shared Value (CSV) thus, is a strategic approach that aims to produce economic value while at the same time addressing societal needs and challenges. In contrast to traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR) measures, which are often viewed as an additional cost or separate initiative, CSV implies that social goals are integrated into a company's core business strategy, further positioning the organisation's social impacts as a key factor for long-term profitability and competitiveness.

Finally, in terms of business model innovation, several scholars have highlighted that business models are not fixed but evolve over time, with their focus on value creation shifting as they adapt (Teece, 2010; Afuah, 2014). According to Gupta et al. (2024), the innovation of business models is crucial for companies to remain competitive in an ever-changing global market. A significant driver of this innovation is the growing emphasis on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which has pushed companies to adapt their business models accordingly. For instance, Gupta et al. (2024) explored how tourism managers are developing business models that incorporate the needs of the Base of the Pyramid (BoP) market, the SDGs, and the concept of Creating Shared Value (CSV).

3.4.2 Sustainable Business Model (SBM) Implementation

As societal demands evolve, sustainability is becoming increasingly important in the business sector, prompting companies to engage more deeply with their stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2021; Lüdeke-Freund and Dembek, 2017; cited in Broccardo, 2023). Organisations are reassessing their business models to address economic, environmental, and social goals (Baumgartner, 2014) and exploring how to integrate sustainability into their strategies (Comin et al., 2019). Building on Afuah's (2014) concept of business model innovation, the integration of sustainability can be viewed as a key area for business model transformation. By adopting environmental management practices, companies can innovate their business models to generate and capture value through new operational approaches (Coles et al., 2016). Focusing specifically on the environmental aspect of sustainability, Coles et al. (2016) examine

the role of business models in Small and Medium-sized Tourism Enterprises (SMTEs), investigating how environmental resources and costs are integrated into their business models. They argue that it is essential for environmental management strategies within SMTEs to evolve in response to the rapidly changing conditions that influence business models today. The evidence supporting this includes the competitive advantages that tourism firms can gain from adopting more sustainable practices. For example, attracting new customers who share similar values can generate additional revenue, while savings on environmental costs and utilities can lead to improved financial outcomes. The authors suggest that these findings offer new opportunities for value creation for tourism firms committed to pursuing environmentally responsible strategies.

Sustainable innovation is seen as crucial for survival in a globally competitive market (Naveed et al., 2023), and it also offers a way to positively impact society and the environment (Snihur and Bocken, 2022; cited in Broccardo et al., 2023). Broccardo et al. (2023) note that growing public interest in sustainability has pushed businesses to rethink their business models, with many contemplating a shift towards sustainable business models (SBMs). However, the implementation of SBMs remains, in actual terms, a significant challenge. Indeed, despite the growing interest in sustainability, there is a lack of a comprehensive and organised understanding of the drivers and barriers to successful SBM implementation. As a result, the authors aim to offer a clear framework identifying key drivers and obstacles in SBM implementation, proposing that its implementation can transform unrealised value into captured value.

Over the past two decades, the business model has proven to be a valuable tool for explaining organisational performance and gaining a competitive advantage. As discussed above, a company's business model, defined as the representation of how an organisation "creates, delivers, and captures value" (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010, p. 14), is central to its corporate strategy. Additionally, a clearly defined BM enables a company to secure a competitive advantage by fostering a cycle of innovation and growth (Ricart and Casadesus-Masanell, 2011). However, business models are not fixed; they evolve continuously as businesses seek to generate, capture, and deliver value in an unpredictable and competitive environment (Pedersen

et al., 2018; Preuss, 2011; Wells, 2016; cited in Broccardo et al., 2023). Given the rising societal expectations around sustainability, it is only natural that companies are now adapting their business models to develop Sustainable Business Models (SBMs).

Identifying the factors that drive or restrict the implementation of Sustainable Business Models is an important step toward achieving stable sustainability. This refers to integrating sustainability into the organisation's core practices (Hörisch et al., 2014), as opposed to the more common approach of unstable sustainability, which often involves addressing sustainability issues in a fragmented or incomplete way. Moreover, in the pursuit of stable sustainability, the successful adoption of an SBM requires recognising the captured value and making efforts to recover the wasted or unused value (Bocken et al., 2014). According to the authors, companies must also focus on natural, social, and economic dimensions, recognising factors such as costs, risks, and reputation as key drivers for sustainable value creation (Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2019; cited in Broccardo et al., 2023). Furthermore, the process of integrating sustainability can face several challenges, which can be internal, such as avoiding financial risks (Bocken and Geradts, 2020; Giunipero et al., 2012; Van Bommel, 2018; cited in Broccardo et al., 2023), or external, such as conflicting stakeholder interests and supply chain issues (Matos and Silvestre, 2013; Ocampo et al., 2018; cited in Broccardo et al., 2023).

Several scholars have identified internal factors that can either promote or prevent the adoption of SBMs. Some of them present a broad range of internal drivers, while others focus on more specific ones. For instance, Fellnhöfer (2017) proposes a comprehensive set of internal drivers, including strategy, growth and resource orientation, management structure, reward philosophy, and entrepreneurial culture. These factors are believed to encourage opportunity-based behaviour and foster innovation towards sustainability. Additionally, Lozano (2015) emphasises the importance of leadership as a critical internal driver, suggesting that leadership plays a key role in connecting internal and external drivers in a holistic model. Effective leadership and decision-making processes are vital for the successful implementation of sustainable activities. Pedersen et al. (2018), cited in Broccardo et al. (2023), further argue that corporate objectives must align with deeply rooted organisational values, meaning sustainability goals should not merely reflect an adaptation to

external pressures but should be rooted in the company's core values. Rauter et al. (2017) also highlight the positive influence of personal motivating factors, values, and organisational culture as crucial internal drivers for sustainability. For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), organisational resources and capabilities are seen as essential for the successful adoption of SBMs (Leonidou et al., 2017; cited in Broccardo et al., 2023).

On the other hand, internal obstacles have also been a subject of study. A significant body of literature discusses various tensions as critical challenges to SBM implementation, which are categorised as performing, organising, belonging, and learning tensions (Van Bommel, 2018; cited in Broccardo et al., 2023). Performing tensions arise when companies struggle to balance the pursuit of profit with the desire to contribute positively to social and environmental issues. Organising tensions stem from conflicts regarding the structural placement of sustainability departments within the company, which can hinder effective implementation. Belonging tensions occur when there is a conflict between moral standards and the potential risk of losing sales due to sustainability efforts. Finally, learning tensions arise because sustainability requires a long-term approach, whereas companies often focus on short-term objectives in their management practices.

In summary, internal drivers and obstacles are factors that companies can directly manage to achieve sustainability goals. According to contingency theory, these drivers can be categorised into three main areas: strategy and governance (including strategic orientation, resource orientation, growth orientation, and sustainable values); organisation (including entrepreneurial culture, leadership, reward philosophy, and human resources); and management (including management structure, operational drivers, and decision-making processes). Internal obstacles can be similarly categorised but focus primarily on tensions related to the challenge of balancing financial goals with sustainability objectives.

When considering the external drivers influencing the implementation of sustainable business models, scholars like Lozano (2015) focus on specific external drivers, such as regulation and legislation, customer demands, reputation, and societal expectations. Others, such as Ocampo et al. (2018) and Giunipero et al. (2012), as

cited in Broccardo et al. (2023), have grouped these factors into broader categories. They proposed three key driver categories: government and regulatory bodies, pressure groups and interest groups, and the broader community and society. These drivers highlight the influence of various stakeholders, both primary (customers, suppliers, and regulators) and secondary (e.g., media and non-governmental organisations), who can pressure companies to adopt SBMs. Among these, reputational concerns are primarily associated with the broader community and society.

On the other hand, insufficient or limited engagement with external stakeholders, and the general business environment, can hinder SBM adoption. Additionally, conflicting interests among potential stakeholders can introduce complexity, impeding the implementation of sustainability strategies. Specifically, in the context of bottom-of-the-pyramid initiatives, Matos and Silvestre (2013), as cited in Broccardo et al. (2023), highlighted obstacles related to consumer awareness and interest in sustainability, especially during economic downturns. Similarly, Chkanikova and Mont (2015), as cited in Broccardo et al. (2023), noted that during challenging economic times, consumers may show less concern for sustainability issues.

External factors, whether drivers or barriers, are beyond the direct control of the organisation. The primary external drivers for SBM implementation can be categorised into four areas: regulation and government orientation (including government and regulatory bodies); stakeholder pressure (which encompasses pressure from interest groups, reputation concerns, and societal expectations); technological advancements (such as digital technology); and the circular economy. On the other hand, external barriers to SBM adoption include conflicting interests among stakeholders, insufficient consumer education and awareness, difficulties in supply chain management, and challenges related to regulation and government policies.

Internal and external drivers are fundamental factors in the creation and capture of value when implementing a successful sustainable business model. This value generation and capture benefit not only the company but also its stakeholders,

including the community, government, employees, and customers. As Bocken et al. (2014) emphasise, achieving sustainability value and effectively distributing it among stakeholders is crucial for attaining stable sustainability. In the exchange of value between the company and its stakeholders, uncaptured value presents a significant challenge, but also an opportunity to increase value for all parties involved. Yang et al. (2017) categorise lost value into four types: surplus, absent, missed, and destroyed. Each type of uncaptured value presents distinct internal and external obstacles, which require different strategies to convert them into captured value. These categories and strategies are as follows:

1. Value surplus refers to value created but not demanded by stakeholders. To convert this surplus into captured value, companies must overcome external barriers, such as educating stakeholders to increase their awareness and appreciation of the sustainability value provided by the company.
2. Value absence occurs when the necessary value is not created, but stakeholders require it. This can be turned into captured value if the company introduces new value propositions that meet stakeholders' needs.
3. Value missed is value that was created but not utilised by stakeholders, despite being requested. Overcoming both internal and external obstacles is key to transforming missed value into captured value. Internal barriers may include organisational and management limitations, while external barriers might involve conflicting stakeholder interests, insufficient customer awareness, or issues with supply chain management.
4. Value destroyed represents negative value that harms both the company and its stakeholders, including environmental or social damage. This type of value can be addressed by overcoming obstacles such as inadequate regulations and low organisational or societal awareness.

This comprehensive classification of uncaptured value provides a clearer understanding of how companies can turn uncaptured value into value that benefits both the company and its stakeholders, contributing to stable sustainability. Finally, the literature reviewed suggests that by mapping these internal and external obstacles

and understanding how they operate, companies can successfully convert uncaptured value into captured value. Broccardo et al. (2023) argue that when companies address these obstacles, they can unlock economic, social, and environmental benefits, thus ensuring the success of a strong SBM.

Chapter 4. Methodology

In *Chapters 2* and *3*, it has been highlighted that, in response to the negative impacts of mass tourism and the growing public awareness surrounding these issues, academic literature has increasingly focused on how conventional tourism organisations, mostly, large tour operators, are integrating sustainable practices into their business model or transitioning towards SBM. Indeed, these traditional players in the tourism sector have been motivated by both rising demand for more sustainable travel choices, and pressure from international organisations to adopt environmentally sustainable practices. However, existing literature has given limited attention to the analysis of business models adopted by organisations involved in alternative forms of tourism, such as responsible tour operators that build their business model on the principles of responsible tourism. Addressing this gap, this research aims to explore how responsible tour operators structure and operate their business models, with the goal of addressing the following research question: *What are the key components of responsible tour operators' business models, and how do they create, deliver, and capture value in line with sustainability principles to drive a paradigm shift in the tourism industry?*

To achieve this, the research adopts an inductive qualitative approach based on multiple case studies of small and medium-sized responsible tour operators. The selected approach is considered suitable for investigating phenomena that remain underexplored by the literature. With regards to the case studies selected for the analysis, the research strategy involved collecting and analysing both primary data collected through semi-structured interviews, and secondary data collected mainly through company documentation and websites. The decision to use an inductive research design comes from its ability to generate theoretical insights and concepts through the direct examination of real-world cases. This is especially important when the phenomena being studied have not yet been systematically addressed in the literature (Glazer and Strauss, 1967). This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the operational, strategic, and value-based characteristics of the responsible tour operators' business models. In this regard, the study seeks to

contribute to the theoretical development of responsible tourism by providing an analysis and representation of organisations that, although still marginal in comparison to the actors operating within the dominant paradigm, are already active within the sector and potentially capable of influencing its future evolution.

4.1 Selection of Case Studies

The Italian Association for Responsible Tourism (AITR) served as the central point for selecting the tour operators that represent the case studies analysed in the research. AITR brings together a diverse range of Italian tour operators involved in responsible tourism and operating both nationally and internationally. The diversity among its members, in terms of size, operational models, and breadth of offerings, provides a rich and heterogeneous foundation for the analysis, enabling a broad perspective that extends beyond a single organisational model.

Indeed, for the selection of case studies, this research focuses exclusively on responsible tour operators that are partners of AITR. This methodological choice is based on the need to identify and select those organisations that are truthfully committed to responsible tourism practices, beyond superficial declarations or marketing claims and strategies. Unlike the term “organic”, which is legally protected and regulated at both national and European levels, terms such as “responsible”, “sustainable”, and “ethical” are not subject to any legal protection. As a result, any tourism operator can label itself using these terms, regardless of its actual practices. In this context, certification systems represent the only concrete guarantee, providing objective criteria to distinguish organisations that genuinely adopt responsible tourism standards. AITR plays exactly this role by certifying its partners through a transparent evaluation process based on shared criteria. Therefore, selecting tour operators affiliated with AITR allows the author to focus the analysis on organisations that are truly engaged in a structured path of responsibility, offering a reliable and consistent foundation for the research.

Furthermore, AITR played a key role as an intermediary between the author and the tour operators selected as case studies, facilitating connections and helping to secure access to relevant data. Additionally, the Association's President, Maurizio Davolio, with his in-depth knowledge of the operational and strategic dynamics of responsible tour operators, made a significant contribution to the research by offering a cross-cutting perspective that helped to contextualise and connect the individual cases' analysis.

Founded in 1998, AITR (registered as an *Aps – Associazione di Promozione Sociale*) is the entity that represents the responsible tourism sector in Italy. It advocates for responsible tourism operators at both national and international levels and provides, as discussed above, responsible tourism certification for organisations. AITR is committed to promoting the principles, values, and practices of responsible tourism; it fosters positive relationships between local communities, travellers, and tour operators, while also supporting the growth and development of its members. AITR counts 92 members, including tour operators, environmental associations, NGOs, cooperatives, and hospitality providers. Tour operators, specifically, make up a key and distinctive group, representing up to 25% of the total number of members.

Therefore, the sample consists of 23 tour operators affiliated with the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism, as listed in *Table 1*. These operators provide a particularly robust basis for the study, as they represent a formally recognised network of organisations whose business models are rooted in the principles of responsible tourism, principles that guide both their strategic and operational decisions. Furthermore, these organisations are characterised by a high level of operational transparency, which enables the in-depth documentary analysis (through informational materials, websites, social balance sheets, ethical codes, among others) to represent a useful and reliable method for accurately reconstructing their business models.

AITR's member travel organisers are diverse in their operations and scope. Some specialise in domestic travel within Italy, while others operate internationally. Certain tour operators focus on catering to specific demographics, such as Panda Adventure and Palma Nana, which offer trips for young people. Others, like Curiosi

di Natura, Sardaigne en Liberté, AddioPizzo, and Palma Nana, are dedicated to promoting particular areas or regions of Italy. There are also tour operators who concentrate on specific global regions, such as Africa Wild Truck and Peru Responsabile. Additionally, some tour operators offer both domestic and international travel, including Planet Viaggi Responsabili, Four Seasons Natura e Cultura, Viaggi Solidali, Walden Viaggi a Piedi, WWF Travel, Jonas Vacanze Ecologiche, RAM Viaggi Incontro, ViaggieMiraggi, Girolibero, Dafne, and Outhere Tour. Despite these differences in market and geographical reach, all these operators share a strong commitment to responsible tourism. They prioritise the empowerment and well-being of local communities, ensuring that they benefit from, rather than endure the negative consequences of organised tourism. Moreover, these operators are dedicated to environmental and biodiversity conservation, ensuring that every trip they offer adheres to the principles of sustainability.

Table 1. *List of Tour Operators partnered with AITR*

Name	Description
Viaggi Solidali	- Cooperative, founded in 2004, organises trips based on the principles of responsible tourism shared by AITR; - Has 8 internal staff members and 27 country coordinators; - Operates in 40 different destinations, offering 100 different itineraries and year-round departures; - Its offerings include group and tailor-made tours, and intercultural urban itineraries; - To date, it has accompanied over 20,000 travellers; - Total turnover recorded in 2022 amounted to Euro 1,699,903.
Planet Viaggi Responsabili	- SME, tour operator based in Italy, founded in 1999, partner of AITR since 2002; - Operates in over 45 countries across Europe, North America, Central and South America, Africa, and Asia;

	- Its offerings include group and tailor-made tours, proposals include themed trips and accessible tourism trips; - Received <i>Travelife Partner</i> recognition in 2023 for its commitment to sustainability and corporate social responsibility.
ViaggieMiraggi	- Social cooperative, founded in 2000, with operational headquarters in Padua, Milan, and Naples; - Social structure of 8 worker-members, 12 volunteer-members, and 6 lending-members; the cooperative has a total of 173 members, including 70 legal entities and 103 individuals; - Operates across 4 continents (Africa, America, Asia, and Europe) and collaborates with over 100 local communities in 50 countries, supporting more than 200 social projects; - Total turnover recorded in 2023 amounted to Euro 3,495,039; - Offers both group and tailor-made trips; including a wide variety of trip types.
RAM Viaggi	- Born as an association organising trips for its members in 1991; became a professional tour operator in 2005; among the founding members of AITR; - The team includes a director, a technical director, and 6 collaborators; - Highly specialised in Asian destinations, including the Middle East, Indian subcontinent, Tibetan region, Southeast Asia and the Far East; later expanded offerings to many other destinations, including Italy, Cuba and Cape Verde; - Offers both group and tailor-made trips.

Addiopizzo Travel	- Social cooperative and tour operator founded in 2009; offers mafia-free ethical tourism in Sicily, supporting anti-mafia initiatives; - Supports local business: only works with suppliers that are not related to mafia activities; worked with 270 (2023) local service providers; - Over 15,000 travellers with a turnover of Euro 1,200,000 (2023); from 2009 to 2023, over 65,000 people have travelled with them; - Team includes 8 staff members, 13 guides and tour leaders, plus additional collaborators.
Africa Wild Truck	- Local tour operator based in Malawi, founded in 2005; - Organises responsible tourism trips along off-the-beaten-path itineraries across Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Botswana, and Kenya; - The trips include expeditions on 4x4 vehicles; tailor made tour; trekking tours; families adventures, voluntourism.
Appennino Slow	- Organises slow-paced walks and treks (on foot or by mountain bike) to support local communities throughout Italy, with a focus on the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines; - Team includes 16 staff members and 23 environmental hiking guides.
Betania Travel	- Tour operator part of Betania social cooperative ONLUS; Promotes inclusive and tailor-made responsible travel while supporting social integration; - Offers small group tours, as well as trips for couples and solo travellers; featuring cultural tourism, food and wine experiences, trekking and hiking, cycling tours, and religious tourism.

Circolo degli Esploratori	- Tour operator with over 20 years of experience; - Creates slow travel experiences on foot or by bike in Italy for both individuals and groups, with guided or self-guided options; - Offers both fixed and tailor-made itineraries.
Dafne Viaggi	- Tour operator incoming, founded in 2013; - Designs travel experiences in Liguria, focusing on biodiversity, local heritage, and accessibility.
Four Seasons Natura e Cultura	- Tour operator founded in 1993; has the leadership in the Italian market for hiking, nature, and cultural tourism; - Offers a wide variety of ecotourism and trekking tours off the conventional routes; - Operates in Italy, Europe, and worldwide (including Africa, Central and South America, the Middle East, and the Far East, among others).
Girolibero + Zeppelin	- Established tour operator with an extensive range of organised travel offerings; - Organises cycling trips, walking tours, trekking, and boat journeys, as well as cultural and nature-based tours focused on local traditions; - Operates in Europe, Africa, Asia, South and North America; offering both guided group tours and independent travel options, with specific packages designed for family travel.
I Viaggi del GOEL	- Founded within the GOEL cooperative group; promotes mafia-free and ethical travel in Calabria through social and ecological initiatives; - Offers trips for both groups and individual travellers.
Jonas	- Designs and organises active, experiential, and sustainable holidays; offers bike, walking, and

	horseback trips away from mass tourism destinations, promoting micro-tourism; - Provides both self-guided and group travel packages; - Operates in Italy and selected destinations in Europe.
Natura da Vivere	- Tour operator specialised in ecotourism, founded in 2000; - Offers nature-based and cultural trips in Italy and worldwide; - Organises small group tours with guides, for both adults and families.
OuthereTour	- Several years of activity in the field of responsible tourism; designs meaningful small-group organised trips focused on sustainability, legality, and local interaction; - Operates in Italy and across Europe; offering walking, sailing, and cycling trips; - Develops targeted travel experiences based on market segments: <i>Outexperience</i> for adults, <i>Outventures</i> for young travellers, <i>Outschool</i> for school groups, and <i>OutherLanguage</i> for those who want to travel while learning the local language.
Palma Nana	- Social cooperative; Develops educational tourism in Sicily for families and youth, aiming to foster environmental awareness; - Offers relational and experiential travel experiences for travellers seeking to understand local culture and traditions through direct interaction with residents.
Panda Avventure	- Limited liability company; Represents one of the largest organisations in Italy in the field of sustainable and educational tourism for youth and families; - Operates within Italy;

	- Offers nature-based tours in national parks and protected areas, combining outdoor adventures with environmental awareness.
Peruresponsabile	- Binational Italian-Peruvian tour operator; operating since the early 2000s; market leader in Italy for travel to Peru; - Organises responsible and community-based travel in Peru and across Latin America; - Offers group tours with scheduled monthly departures and tailor-made trips; also provides itineraries that combine multiple neighbouring countries.
Sardegna en Liberté	- Limited liability company; Incoming tour operator based in Sardinia; Creates eco-friendly and community-based tours, prioritising local engagement, and biodiversity; - Offers slow tourism experiences in small groups or individual tours; - Work with a wide range of clients: families, groups, couples, and companies;
Viaggi del Genio	- Tour operator based on Elba Island, founded in 1993; composed of a team of 12 members; - Operates in the field of ecotourism and responsible tourism; - Offers eco-cultural trips in Italy and across 4 continents (Europe, Asia, Africa and America); combining education, nature, and local culture in small group adventures; - Specialises in educational travel and environmental education experiences for young people.
Viaggi Responsabili by EquoTube	- Organises sustainable trips worldwide (Italy, Asia, Africa, and South America);

	- Works through a network of ethical partners, encouraging deep local engagement and cultural immersion.
WWF Travel	- Official travel branch of WWF Italy; founded in 2017; - Offers nature-focused trips led by biologists and environmental experts, supporting biodiversity conservation and environmental education; - Organises summer camps for children and trips for adults and families, all guided by environment experts; - Operates in Italy and internationally (including Africa, Antarctica, Asia, Central and South America, Europe, and North America).

4.2 Data Collection

Two different techniques of data collection were used, semi-structured interviews and secondary data analysis.

4.2.1 Secondary Data

The author collected secondary data for all selected organisations primarily through official websites and relevant institutional documentation. This involved systematically reviewing both publicly available materials, such as organisational statements and annual reports, and limited-access materials shared directly by the organisations with the author. The aim was to gain insight and gather data on the business models and operational practices of the responsible tour operators. Specifically, the sources consulted included official websites, social reports, financial statements, presentation materials, institutional flyers, and various documents such as the sustainability policy, travel catalogue, and general terms and conditions of tour package sales. Additionally, the *Tour Operator Catalogue* published by AITR, along

with two other key documents - *Proposed Guidelines for Development Cooperation and Tourism* and *Responsible Tourism Criteria System for Tour Operators* - were consulted as supplementary sources to enhance the understanding of the operational features of the affiliated tour operators. All secondary data, while preserving their original language and format to enable coding following the Gioia methodology, were compiled into a single Word document of approximately 50 pages. This document was organised by organisation and overarching concept, while specific documents such as annual reports were included in full without thematic breakdowns. The structure aimed to facilitate a cohesive and manageable framework for subsequent analysis and coding.

4.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with two key informants: Maurizio Davolio, President of the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism (AITR), and Enrico Marletto, Founder and President of the tour operator Viaggi Solidali. The President of AITR was initially contacted via email, and an interview was scheduled accordingly. An introductory protocol outlining the aims of the research and the structure of the interview was shared by Davolio with partner tour operators affiliated with AITR. Among these, Viaggi Solidali confirmed its willingness to participate and additionally granted access to internal documents that were not publicly available, thereby enriching the dataset with valuable insights. Prior to the interviews, both informants received a detailed interview guide intended to inform them about the content and structure of the interview (see Appendix A for interview protocols). Additionally, the President of AITR, Maurizio Davolio, provided a written reflection via email ahead of the interview, offering an initial overview and introduction of key topics that were later expanded upon during the interview. This written document was treated as primary data, collected and later analysed.

Both interviews were conducted in Italian via video call, recorded, manually transcribed, and later translated into English by the author. The transcripts were compiled into a Word document of 32 pages. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. For clarification or further details, the authors reapproached the interviewees and gave them final transcripts for reading and approval.

The interviews followed a semi-structured, open-ended format, which allowed for both consistency across topics and the flexibility to explore emerging themes. Indeed, the interview protocols served as guiding frameworks rather than rigid scripts. During the interviews, new and unanticipated topics surfaced, prompting the author to ask follow-up questions and delve into areas that had not been initially considered.

The protocol followed during the interview with the President of AITR (Appendix A) was centred around the business models of responsible tour operators and related concepts; the questions were designed to elicit a broader understanding of responsible tour operators' activity. In contrast, the protocol for the interview with the Founder and President of Viaggi Solidali (Appendix B) was more targeted, as it was developed on the basis of insights drawn from a preliminary analysis of secondary sources, including both publicly available and internal documents. As such, the questions targeted specific aspects of the organisation's business model that required further clarification and in-depth exploration.

With regards to the theoretical foundations of the interview protocols, the construction of both interview protocols was based on the literature review outlined in *Chapter 3*, particularly the sections on sustainable tourism (*Section 3.2*) and business model theory (*Section 3.3*). Both protocols were developed using Kaplan's (2012) conceptualisation of business models as an overarching framework. According to Kaplan, "a business model is a story about how an organisation creates, delivers, and captures value" (p. 18). These three macro-areas, value creation, value delivery, and value capture, structured the development of the interview questions. Additionally, the protocols also drew on key contributions from the categorisation proposed by Font and Cochrane (2005) and further developed by Khairat and Maher (2012) which helped shape questions around five critical areas for implementing

sustainable tourism practices: internal management, product development, supply chain management, customer relationship, and destination cooperation. These dimensions were mapped across the three value-related component of business models.

For the value creation category, the interview questions were informed not only by Kaplan's framework but also by a broader body of literature; for instance, by Bramwell and Lane (2011) who emphasises the importance of community participation in tourism planning and governance as a key driver of sustainability. Additionally, Spasić (2012) provides a foundation for questions related to supply chain management, highlighting how sustainability criteria can be integrated into "the process of procurement and contracting with suppliers". The same author also notes how regulatory constraints may limit the involvement of small, local partners due to quality requirements. In the value delivery dimension, the development of the protocols was informed by Caroli's (2021) analysis of customer relationships and distribution channels. For the value capture section, the framework draws on Chesbrough et al. (2018), who define it as "the process of securing financial or non-financial returns from value creation" (p. 933), as well as on Sjödin et al. (2019), who expand the definition by including the concept of the distribution of the value captured among stakeholders. In addition, the interview protocol was further inspired by a set of reflective questions proposed by Teece (2010). Finally, the questions exploring the degree of innovation within the business model were inspired by Gupta et al. (2024), who underscore the central role of innovation in advancing organisational competitiveness in today's dynamic business environment.

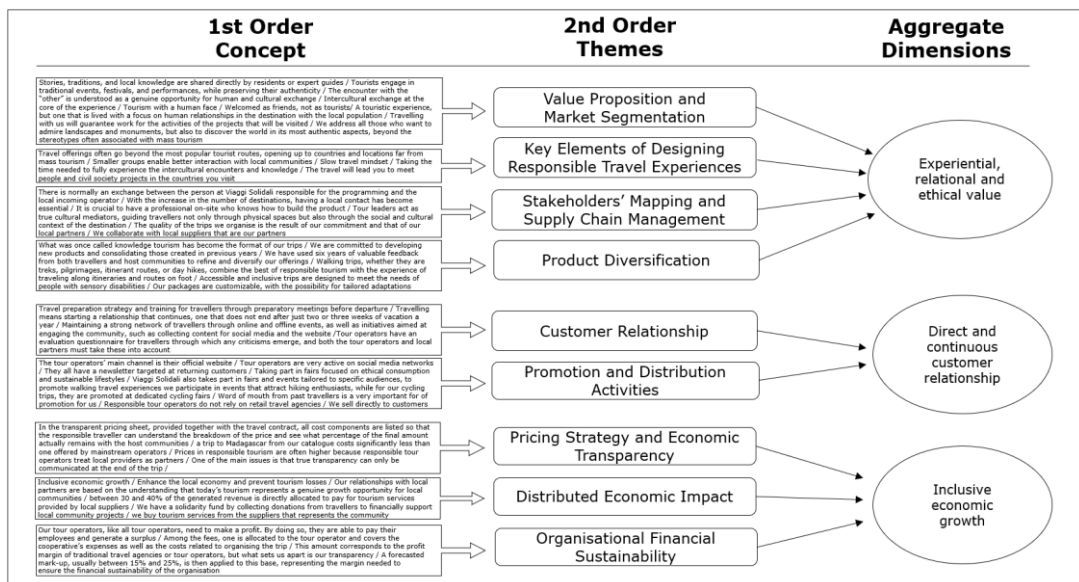
4.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data, collected through both semi-structured interviews and secondary data, followed an inductive research approach grounded in the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012), which aligns with the principles of grounded theory. Following this preliminary phase, the author reviewed both primary and secondary

sources collected into two separate Word documents to develop a thorough understanding of the case studies.

A manual coding approach was adopted for the analysis, with all interview transcripts and the secondary data compilation document systematically analysed in a multi-stage, iterative process. The author began by performing initial data coding of both primary and secondary data, preserving the original language and terminology used by informants and within the organisational documents, in accordance with the Gioia method. Hence, first-order codes were generated based on participants' own words and recurring expressions found across the data. These codes were then organised by topic and interpreted into theoretical second-order themes, reflecting research-driven concepts. In the final phase, the second-order themes were grouped into three broad aggregate dimensions, aligned with business model theory. The analysis followed an iterative rather than linear process, involving continuous movement between the data, emerging patterns, and relevant literature. Triangulation between interview data and secondary sources further strengthened the credibility and robustness of the analysis. The data were gradually refined into coherent conceptual themes.

Figure 7. Data Structure with Gioia Methodology



Source: Author's own elaboration on adapted structure by Gioia et al. (2012, p. 21)

Chapter 5. Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism (AITR) and its affiliated tour operator partners, which are key players in the responsible tourism sector.

Among the operators analysed, Viaggi Solidali, Planet Viaggi Responsabili, ViaggieMiraggi, and RAM Viaggi Incontro were selected as representative case studies. These four tour operators, each with over 20 years of experience, were chosen due to their extensive presence in both national and international markets, covering a wide range of destinations and offering a wide range of travel packages. For instance, Viaggi Solidali organises trips to 40 destinations with 100 different itineraries and year-round departures; similarly, Planet Viaggi Responsabili operates in over 45 countries. ViaggieMiraggi, active since 2000, works on four continents and collaborates with over 100 local communities in 50 countries, supporting more than 200 social projects. Similarly, RAM Viaggi Incontro, a responsible tourism operator since 2005, began with destinations in Asia and Italy and has since expanded to many other regions. As such, they represent the broader possible scope of the responsible tourism model in terms of market reach and geographical diversity.

In addition to these operators, the results discussed in this chapter also include the analysis of all the other tour operator partners of AITR. While many have similar extended market and geographic scope to the tour operators mentioned above, operating both nationally and internationally and targeting a broad market segment, others, as seen in their description in *Table 1 (Section 4.1)*, tend to focus on specific geographical destinations and market segments by offering thematic travel packages. These tour operators can be classified into two categories: some specialise their operations in particular destinations, such as Africa Wild Truck and Perú Responsabile. Other operators focus on specific types of travel or thematic experiences, such as nature and biodiversity, including Appennino Slow, Four Seasons Natura e Cultura, Walden Viaggi a Piedi, WWF Travel, among others. Furthermore, some operators combine both geographical and thematic focuses,

offering tailored experiences in particular regions while also addressing specific themes, such as Addiopizzo Travel, Palma Nana, and Sardegna en Liberté.

Although these other tour operators operate within a more narrowly defined scope, they nonetheless provide a solid and valuable basis for analysing the operational models of organisations operating within responsible tourism logics. Indeed, despite intentionally targeting more specific market segments, these represent well-established and mature enterprises. Take, for example, Perú Responsabile, which has always organised trips according to the principles of responsible tourism and today holds a leading position in the Italian market for travel to Peru. Naturally, certain components of their business models may diverge from those adopted by operators with a broader portfolio of destinations and thematic offerings. These divergences reflect strategic adaptations to the specific operational contexts and target markets of each organisation. Nonetheless, the foundational principles of responsible tourism remain consistently upheld across all cases. For example, in the case of Four Seasons Natura e Cultura, a tour operator with a strong emphasis on environmental and nature-oriented travel, the selection of tour guides may prioritise not only individuals with a strong connection to the local territory and community, but also those with expertise in environmental sciences and related fields. In summary, the findings represented below outline a general framework that is valid for all the tour operators analysed. However, it is essential to recognise that when an operator specialises in specific themes or destinations, or operates as an incoming tour operator, its business model structure may deviate or may incorporate tailored elements, specific variations or additions. These adjustments do not replace but rather complement the foundational principles of responsible tourism, which remain unchanged and form the common basis of the entire industry.

Finally, with regard to the structure of this chapter, rather than presenting the findings for each tour operator individually, the results have been organised thematically, following the theoretical framework of value creation, value delivery, and value capture.

5.1 Value Creation

The first component of the analysis focuses on how responsible tourism tour operators create value, specifically, how, and with and for whom, the organisation generates this value, as discussed by Kaplan (2012) and further explored by Freudenreich et al. (2020). In this context, value emerges through multiple interconnected dimensions, which are captured in the first aggregate dimension identified through the Gioia Methodology (*Figure 7*), “Experiential, relational, and ethical value.” Indeed, the value is created for the customer building on these three dimensions: experiential, as it involves the creation of unique and authentic travel itineraries; relational, as it is based on the core element of meaningful encounter with local communities; and ethical-economic, as it offers customers the opportunity to consume tourism ethically, directing their value (money) to the development of the destination.

5.1.1 Value Proposition and Customer Segmentation

The selected tour operators analysed design and deliver tourism experiences that intentionally differ from those typical of mass tourism. Their offerings emphasise intercultural exchange, slow travel, and community-based engagement. The analysis of their value propositions reveals a strategic orientation toward experiential differentiation, grounded in ethical and relational principles. In addition to organising and directly producing travel packages, ranging from group tours to tailor-made itineraries, these operators also develop opportunities for meaningful encounters. For the customer, value is thus structured across three main dimensions: experiential, relational, and ethical-economic.

In responsible tourism, experiential value is built through organised travel itineraries that stand out for their originality, authenticity, and cultural depth. The final product is not standardised, meaning that the proposed itineraries do not follow

standardised routes but are the result of a co-design process with local communities, and therefore shaped by the specific characteristics of the territory and its people. This collaboration makes it possible to offer unique experiences, deeply rooted in the identity of the place, and therefore not easily replicable by conventional tour operators. At the heart of the experience is a genuine encounter with the destination, guided by those who know it intimately. Stories, traditions, and local knowledge are shared directly by residents or expert guides, who provide an engaging and conscious narrative that enriches the journey and deepens its meaning. A meaningful example is offered by ViaggieMiraggi, which states in its value proposition the intention to “create a sense of community and encourage more responsible behaviour among tourists, so that they return home with personal growth and the awareness of having travelled with care through a land and culture different from their own.” This experiential approach not only benefits the traveller, who returns home with a deeper understanding of the country visited and a much richer set of experiences and insights compared to conventional tourism, where interaction with local communities is often limited, but also contributes to the recognition and appreciation of the human and cultural heritage of the destination involved. This dimension of value creation can, for instance, be enhanced by allowing tourists to engage in traditional events, festivals, and performances, while preserving their authenticity and ensuring that participation occurs with proper informed consent.

The encounter with the “other”, understood as a genuine opportunity for human and cultural exchange, represents the distinctive relational element of the value proposition in responsible tourism. Hence, the relational dimension is a core element of the value proposition of responsible tour operators. Travellers come into direct contact with local communities, associations, guides, and small local operators, enabling the creation of rich experiences. For the tour operators analysed, building relationships with local communities is not a secondary aspect, but the very heart of the travel experience. For example, Viaggi Solidali describes its approach as “knowledge-based tourism, in which intercultural exchange is at the core of the experience,” and highlights its aim of “offering a way to meet and get to know people and countries different from our own, based on the principle of mutual respect. In short, tourism with a human face.” ViaggieMiraggi also emphasises this dimension,

stating that “travelling with ViaggieMiraggi will lead you to meet people and civil society projects in the countries you visit, with particular attention to fair trade and development cooperation.” These encounters, often with communities that are outside the typical circuits of conventional tourism, allow travellers to access new perspectives while actively supporting local economies and social initiatives.

As Davolio, President of AITR, recounts, it is not uncommon for travellers to be invited into private homes, to attend local celebrations, or to participate in religious ceremonies typically closed to outsiders. These forms of inclusion reflect a level of trust and openness that is rarely accessible through conventional tourism. Marletto, President and Founder of Viaggi Solidali, explains the intrinsic value of the relational dimension recalling a trip to Senegal during which a local partner remarked that travellers were “welcomed as friends, not as tourists”. This feeling of being treated as a friend rather than a tourist is precisely what motivates people to choose responsible tour operators and often leads them to repeat the experience with the same type of provider. Ultimately, the journey becomes a transformative relational experience, where value is measured not only by the places visited but above all by the human connections established along the way.

Finally, on the ethical-economic level, the transparency of costs, the direct involvement of local actors in the value chain and the redistributive economic impact of the trip, which generates concrete economic benefits for the host communities, are emphasised. This is done through the selection of specific suppliers capable of generating the value that tour operators are intended to create for travellers. Although the value exchange is still based on the principles of an economic exchange, in many cases, the proposed experiences include a solidarity component: the trip becomes not only an opportunity to learn about international cooperation projects, but also a concrete way to support them financially. This is how tourism is transformed into an active instrument of local development. Planet Viaggi Responsabili, for example, emphasises how its trips are designed to boost the economies of the destination countries, building fair and equal economic relations with local partners and supporting their professional growth. In this way, the traveller directly contributes to a fairer and more conscious economic system. ViaggieMiraggi also emphasises this vision by stating that “travelling with us will guarantee work for the activities of the

projects that will be visited, transforming tourism into an instrument of emancipation and justice for the local populations, subtracting energy from a model devoted to exploitation in order to invest it in one centred on the person and nature”. Choosing a responsible tourism travel product, therefore, means contributing to a virtuous, fair and sustainable economic model, in which the value generated by tourism is not dispersed but redistributed locally for the benefit of local communities.

Therefore, the distinctive value proposition of responsible tourism tour operators is built upon a dual focus. On the one hand, the “traditional” touristic aspect of the trip, which includes visits to places of historical and cultural interest, such as archaeological sites, monuments, cities and markets; on the other hand, the central element of the authentic encounter with local populations, which represents the heart of the experience of responsible tourism trips. Indeed, in addition to discovering the natural and cultural beauty of a country, travellers have the opportunity to meet representatives of associations, cooperatives, groups involved in fair trade, and organisations that promote social and environmental development projects.

This dual focus is further elaborated by Marletto, who describes the value proposition of *Viaggi Solidali* as “a touristic experience, but one that is lived with a focus on human relationships in the destination with the local population.” He emphasises the need to find a balance between professional tourist services and the distinctive human-centred elements of responsible tourism. To illustrate this concept in practice, Marletto recounts an example from a trip to Japan organised by *Viaggi Solidali*. While most conventional tour operators include a standard daytime visit to the well-known Shinto shrine on Miyajima Island, typically involving long queues and large crowds, the responsible tour operator takes a different approach: the group stays overnight in a ryokan on the island, a traditional guesthouse run by a local family; guests share a meal with the hosts and take an evening walk, enjoying the island in quietness after the departure of day visitors. The shrine is visited early the next morning, before the arrival of the first tourist ferry. This example underscores the experiential value embedded in responsible tourism; by entering local contexts respectfully and at a slower pace, travellers gain access to more meaningful and less commodified experiences. The central focus is not on constructing a performance of

authenticity for tourists, but on enabling them to live the destination as insiders rather than as tourists.

A key element that complements the three previously identified dimensions of value creation – experiential, relational, and ethical-economic - in responsible tourism lies in the organised nature of the travel experience itself. The trips offered by responsible tour operators are, in fact, organised tours, an aspect that meets travellers' need for guidance, safety and peace of mind during their travel experience. The choice to rely on an operator with expertise and deep knowledge of the destination is often driven by the desire for a sense of security and reassurance. The concept of feeling protected within the structured framework of organised tourism, while still preserving the immersive and value-based characteristics of responsible tourism, is fundamental. In this context, as Marletto points out, brand reliability becomes essential: what customers are buying is not just a trip, but also trust in a solid, competent, and responsible organisation.

Thus, among the motivations that drive travellers to choose responsible tourism is the desire to get in touch with the authentic reality of a place, going beyond the stereotypical images reserved for tourists. This type of travel involves slower pacing, less hectic itineraries, a low environmental impact and is based on an economic model that ensures direct and lasting benefits to local communities. These characteristics, which will be explored in more detail in the following section, contribute to shaping an offer perceived as authentic, sustainable and aligned with the values of a customer segment attentive to the social and environmental impacts of their consumption choices. At the same time, it also appeals to a broader audience, one that is attracted by deeper experiences outside of traditional tourist circuits. As Viaggi Solidali states, “We address all those who want to admire landscapes and monuments, but also to discover the world in its most authentic aspects, beyond the stereotypes often associated with mass tourism”. As the Founder of Viaggi Solidali recounts, the tour operator initially targeted a niche audience, already sensitive to ethical issues, often reached through specific channels such as promotional activity in fair trade shops and ethical banks. Today, however, these concerns have become more transversal, and consequently, the market segmentation process has also expanded and diversified. Thus, the dual appeal, aimed at both those seeking ethical

experiences and those who want more authentic and alternative trips, reflects how tour operators have expanded their targeting strategies over time, moving from a niche approach to a more inclusive and transversal one.

Both Marletto and Davolio highlight that the target audience for responsible tourism is increasingly overlapping with that of traditional tourism. While a segment of travellers remains strongly motivated by ethical ideals, interest in more conscious tourism formulas has also extended to those who normally choose more mainstream travel options. This shows how the boundary between the two markets is becoming increasingly blurred: a traveller can alternate between traditional and responsible experiences. As the President of AITR observes, the target segment is therefore very heterogeneous, though it tends to share certain socio-economic characteristics: specifically, a medium-high or high level of education and medium to medium-high economic conditions. Another relevant aspect is represented by the fact that many travellers choose to participate in organised trips individually, confirming the added value generated by group proposals.

5.1.2 Key Elements of Designing Responsible Travel Experiences

The value proposition is built on distinctive elements and characteristics of the travel product.

A fundamental component of value creation in the business models of responsible tourism tour operators lies in the careful selection of the destinations. According to the criteria set by the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism, operators should prioritise areas that are not saturated by mass tourism, focusing instead on lesser-known or unconventional regions. Viaggi Solidali, for instance, states that their travel offerings often go beyond the most popular tourist routes, opening up to countries and locations far from mass tourism, or simply looking at more familiar destinations through a different lens. In doing so, they acknowledge

and respect the carrying capacity of the destination, aiming to prevent the negative impacts of overtourism.

Responsible tour operators, therefore, conduct a thorough feasibility study before introducing a new destination or itinerary. This is essential for two main reasons: first, to ensure the safety and viability of the experience for travellers; and second, to avoid raising false expectations among local communities that might ultimately go unfulfilled. According to AITR, the feasibility analysis includes two main points. The first involves an assessment of the destination, which includes evaluating its tourism potential through a tourism resource audit, verifying key environmental, social, and economic conditions, and conducting a preliminary mapping of local professional partners who could be involved in co-designing the tourism product. The second point focuses on the market dimension: analysing tourism market characteristics, pricing policies, and assessing the competitiveness of the product. For instance, Marletto explains that for many years, Viaggi Solidali did not organise any trips to India, “as many other tour operators were already doing so”. Through this dual-level analysis, responsible tour operators ensure that destination development creates shared value for both travellers and host communities, rather than destroying it, or, in other words, generating negative effects.

Additionally, as the Founder of Viaggi Solidali explains, many destinations that are included in the catalogue are suggested directly by a collaborator or local partner who already has the necessary contacts and knowledge in the area to develop a comprehensive itinerary that aligns with the tour operator’s responsible travel style and practices.

As for the specific features of the trip, two stand out as fixed factors: the small group size and the slow pace of the itinerary. These are considered fundamental to ensuring both the quality and the responsible nature of the travel experience itself. Indeed, the group size is a key element of the travel experience, and all tour operators share the common principle of small travel groups, with the maximum number of participants usually being limited to 10-12 participants. This principle is designed to encourage meaningful meetings with local communities and group cohesion. Smaller groups enable better interaction with local communities, especially those that are

vulnerable, while minimising the negative effects of mass tourism by preventing the community from being repeatedly exposed to its impacts; thereby respecting the community's social carrying capacity.

Another important element of the travel experience, common to all the tour operators analysed, and aligned with the AITR's criteria, is the design of itineraries with relaxed schedules, reflecting what Viaggi Solidali describes as a "slow travel mindset". This approach intentionally avoids rushed schedules and instead focuses on a limited number of carefully selected destinations. This means itineraries must be planned in a way that allow travellers for in-depth exploration, and they need to have a suitable level of flexibility. Marletto, in explaining this characteristic, highlights the *Brasil Airpass*, a ticket that allows unlimited flights within Brazil for 21 days, as an example of a tourism practice that goes against the principles of responsible travel - representing the antithesis of responsible tourism. He explains that such travel practices prevent travellers from truly engaging with the social and historical context of the places they visit. Instead, he emphasises the importance of "taking the time needed to fully experience the intercultural encounters and knowledge." Similarly, RAM Viaggi Incontro, on its website, explains that "during the available days, RAM focuses on a few destinations in depth, rather than a lot of hit-and-run places." They stress that the time spent in a destination is crucial for truly immersing oneself in its rhythm, otherwise, the experience loses both quality and meaning. They also point out that the day-to-day itinerary is precise yet flexible.

Two additional core pillars in the development of the travel product by responsible tour operators are the active involvement of host communities and a strong commitment to environmental sustainability.

Responsible tour operators place empowerment and the central role of local communities at the heart of tourism offer design. This approach is based on the fundamental principle of respecting and promoting the right of communities to actively participate in decisions concerning tourism in their area, fostering lasting, cooperative, and supportive relationships. Community involvement takes place on two closely interconnected levels.

The first concerns the design and implementation phase of the tourism product. Communities are actively involved in all stages, from ideation to evaluation, through participatory methodologies that make it possible to identify local needs and include beneficiaries and stakeholders from the outset. This process supports endogenous development models, supported by local financial investments such as microcredit, and encourages equitable redistribution of benefits. Tour operators integrate local suppliers in the tourism supply chain (hospitality, catering, transport, guides), prioritising family-run and small-scale businesses that reflect the cultural identity of the area. Local partners are also encouraged to provide feedback on their experience.

The second level concerns the traveller's experience and the itinerary structure itself, which is designed to foster authentic encounters and moments of intercultural exchange. According to AITR's responsible tourism criteria, one of the main objectives is to build relationships between travellers, host communities, and local partners. The travel itinerary often includes visits to community associations and opportunities to meet civil society representatives, artisans, farmers, artists, spiritual guides, and many other key figures. These meetings, both informal and organised, allow travellers to benefit from deeper insights into the destination and enriching cultural understanding.

In terms of hospitality and dining, choices are made in alignment with the local context and with the aim of generating a positive impact on the local economy. Travellers stay in locally owned and managed accommodations such as small family-run hotels, guesthouses, private homes, lodges, tents, yurts or gher, depending on the type of the trip. Special attention is given to dining experiences that reflect the local culinary identity. Meals are mainly offered by family-run restaurants, or enjoyed in family homes, street food stalls, and local markets, that use traditional ingredients and recipes, promoting farm-to-table products. The services selected take into account the best relationship between comfort, accessibility and price, trying to reduce inequalities between tourists and residents. For instance, where possible, public transportation, such as trains, is preferred, enabling travellers to experience the journey at the same pace as the local population and fostering immersion in the destination. However, this is applied pragmatically: when necessary, minibuses or

private vehicles are used without dogmatism. Finally, many trips are organised in collaboration with NGOs and include visits to local development cooperation initiatives. These moments allow travellers to learn about local efforts toward social, economic, and environmental sustainability, in line with the core values of responsible tourism.

Throughout the research, both in the literature and in our analysis, it has emerged that the social dimension of sustainability lies at the heart of responsible tourism. This, nonetheless, should not be interpreted as a lack of commitment to the environmental dimension. On the contrary, environmental sustainability, particularly the use of resources in a non-exploitative way, is a key component in the development of responsible travel products and is integrated into all aspects of a responsible tour operator's business model.

According to AITR's criteria, when designing the travel product, tour operators should implement practices to minimise CO₂ emissions. One key strategy used by the tour operators analysed is to carefully balance the distance travelled with the duration of the stay. In order to make long-haul travel more sustainable, they tend to design trips that last at least 15 days; longer stays are preferred because they reduce the frequency of flights to travel time, helping to lower the overall carbon footprint per traveller. In terms of environmental sustainability, significant attention is given to transportation choices. This includes opting for direct flights or those with fewer layovers, as these tend to be more efficient in terms of both time and carbon emissions. Whenever possible, train travel is prioritised over air travel. For local transportation, public or eco-friendly options are preferred, and active modes of travel such as walking or cycling are encouraged. Additionally, vehicles used are appropriate to the size of the group in order to minimise unnecessary emissions. Beyond transportation, tour operators also focus on other environmental aspects of sustainability by selecting eco-friendly accommodations, restaurants, and other facilities. In collaboration with local partners and suppliers, they work to improve the environmental sustainability of the services offered; this can include encouraging the consumption of local, low-impact products, such as those from organic farming, short supply chains, or circular economy practices.

5.1.3 Stakeholders' Mapping and Supply Chain Management

A fundamental principle underlying the value creation of responsible tourism tour operators is the direct knowledge and firsthand experience of the places and people travellers encounter during the trip. To implement this principle, the travel itineraries are designed in close cooperation with local partners, whose contributions are integrated into the core content of the trips. This means that the organisation designs and/or manages the entire trip, or parts of it, with the active participation of partner organisations and active stakeholders within the local community.

In this context, the supply chain is highly localised and ethically selected, which is central to the involvement of host communities. Generally, four main categories of stakeholders can be identified, with whom the organisation interacts and through whom it creates value: the local partners, the tour leaders, the local economy suppliers and the representatives of social or environmental projects active in the area. All these actors play a crucial role within the supply chain and contribute to value creation through relationships based on trust, reciprocity and shared responsibility.

A key actor in the creation of value within responsible tourism models is the local partner, or country correspondent. These collaborators can be either individuals or legal entities and therefore take a variety of forms: from small local travel agencies and incoming tour operators to destination management companies (DMCs), but also individual actors serving as local correspondents, such as solo operators, couples, or families. As Marletto points out, the ideal local correspondent is, in any case, someone with solid professional experience in the tourism sector, regardless of its organisational form. However, resorting to a single individual as a local contact is often considered an extreme solution, used only in the absence of more structured alternatives. Ultimately, what truly matters is not the formal profile of the partner but their ability to ensure competence, reliability, and a strong connection to the territory, qualities that are essential to building a responsible tourism offer that is both authentic and effective.

The involvement of local partners in the value creation process of responsible tourism tour operators begins in the early stages of the trip planning. Working alongside the internal programme manager, they take part in a preliminary assessment of the destination's potential, with particular attention to the economic, social, and cultural impacts that tourism may have on the local area. As Marletto notes, "there is normally an exchange between the person at Viaggi Solidali responsible for the programming and the local incoming operator," confirming the collaborative approach that defines the itinerary co-design process. This collaboration leads to the definition of a responsible tourism itinerary, which includes the selection of local tourism service providers and, where possible, the integration of active social or environmental projects in the area. For instance, Viaggi Solidali works with twenty-seven regional correspondents, each responsible for a specific geographical area.

Value creation is realised through the ongoing work carried out by local partners, who support the organisation's members at various operational levels. Their role, however, extends beyond organisational or technical functions: they serve as a fundamental relational bridge between travellers, eager to understand, experience, and immerse themselves in the local culture, and the host communities, which in turn express legitimate expectations, needs, and interests. The significance of this actor is further highlighted by Marletto, who points out that with the increase in the number of destinations, having a local contact has become essential. According to him, the "organised" tourism model that defines the organisation's approach necessarily requires a local partner capable of gathering the necessary services and delivering them adequately. This concept underscores the importance of having a dedicated professional on-site, as the element of the organisation implies that not all aspects can be managed remotely. In this regard, Marletto further emphasises that, "It is crucial to have a professional on-site who knows how to build the product," highlighting the importance of ensuring quality and consistency in the delivery of services.

Furthermore, when selecting local partners, preference is given to those who can ensure a fair economic return to the local community and who share a common vision of responsible tourism. It is crucial that these partners operate according to ethical principles, including fair working conditions, attention to the well-being of the local population, and a commitment to align with the organisation's mission. As

Davolio emphasises, “One does not seek a generic local tour operator, but rather one with whom a relationship of trust has been established, capable of collaborating with suppliers who share the same values and commitment to sustainability.” This approach highlights the fundamental difference from conventional tour operators, who typically focus on generic suppliers. As Marletto explains, “We do not need a local agency that is used to handling large groups or working with massive hotels. Instead, we prefer to collaborate with a local partner who is already involved in, for instance, ecotourism, and works with small groups. Such a partner is often able to offer more aligned and authentic experiences, with direct connections to small lodges or hotels, making them a much better fit for our responsible tourism model.”

Additionally, the Founder of Viaggi Solidali emphasises the cruciality of having a local representative not only for practical, logistical and relational reasons, as discussed above, but also in terms of the economic aspect related to managing the trip. To illustrate this point, Marletto compares two similar 15-day itineraries: one in collaboration with a local partner and the other without. When working with a local partner, the cost of the trip is easier to be managed, as the organisation applies a single mark-up to the price proposed by the local partner and handles a single payment to them. In contrast, in destinations like Namibia, where Viaggi Solidali does not have a local agency, it is necessary to negotiate separately with multiple representatives and service providers, receiving multiple invoices and facing more complex payment procedures. These steps significantly increase costs and administrative operations. Although the traveller may perceive a similar value, managing directly with individual suppliers entails a greater burden in terms of time and resources. This example demonstrates how working with a local partner not only improves logistical efficiency and provides a local point of contact but also helps reduce management costs.

A second key actor in the creation of value within responsible tourism experiences is the tour leader, whose role goes far beyond that of a simple tour guide. According to the documentation provided by Viaggi Solidali, tour leaders act as true cultural mediators, guiding travellers not only through physical spaces but also through the social and cultural context of the destination. In this sense, the tour leader becomes a facilitator of intercultural exchange, equipped with deep knowledge of the

local environment and its social dynamics, and capable of explaining to visitors acceptable and unacceptable cultural practices. Often selected from the local population, these tour leaders share with travellers an authentic perspective, rooted in a strong emotional connection to their homeland and a participatory view of travel as a mutual exchange. Their role, therefore, combines both logistics and mediation: on the one hand, they manage local organisational aspects; on the other, they act as cultural bridges. Such understanding is further validated by Davolio, who highlights how responsible tour operators tend to work with guides capable of “interpreting” the destination, rather than merely “describing it”. Particularly relevant is the involvement of specific individuals with migratory backgrounds, for instance, those who have lived in Italy and returned to their country of origin, who are especially effective in fostering intercultural understanding due to their dual linguistic and cultural knowledge.

The roles of the local partner and the tour leader can potentially overlap. This is the case of RAM Viaggi Incontro, where six collaborators, each specialised in specific destinations, also act as group leaders. Marletto confirms this possibility by providing concrete examples from experience: for instance, the local representative for Ecuador at Viaggi Solidali occasionally leads trips directly, while the person who designed the first itineraries in Japan also acted as tour leader, drawing on their extensive experience in the country. This combined role is particularly effective in the early stages of product development, when the number of trips is still limited. However, as demand increases, as in the case of Japan, there is a tendency to gradually separate the two roles, assigning the task of leading the trip to locally trained professionals. This dynamic illustrates how organisational flexibility can contribute, especially in the early phases, to the development of travel experiences that are more consistent with the principles of responsible tourism.

Local economy suppliers from whom tourism services are purchased, such as specialised guides, hospitality, dining services, and local transport operators, represent a key category of stakeholders. Their selection is based not only on professional competence within the tourism sector but also on their commitment to an ethical approach aligned with the principles of responsible tourism. Finally, local project representatives constitute an additional category of stakeholders, particularly

relevant in the context of responsible tourism, which often involves close collaboration with community-based social and environmental initiatives. These actors may include non-governmental organisations and non-profit associations linked to local development projects. In addition to the four main categories of stakeholders previously discussed, it is also essential to consider the broader network of institutional relationships that responsible tour operators must interact with. These include local, regional, and national public authorities, as well as key international organisations operating in the fields of tourism and sustainable development. Their involvement is often crucial in enabling partnerships, accessing funding opportunities, and ensuring alignment with broader policy frameworks and sustainability goals.

A distinctive element of the business model adopted by responsible tourism tour operators lies in the nature of the relationships they establish with their stakeholders. The direct involvement of stakeholders is, in fact, a guiding principle of the organisational approach. Stakeholders are regarded as active partners in a shared process of value creation. As Planet Viaggi Responsabili states, “the quality of the trips we organise is the result of our commitment and that of our local partners: non-governmental organisations, non-profit associations, and small sustainable tourism enterprises with whom we build authentic relationships based on joint responsibility.” This perspective is shared by Davolio, who observes, “responsible tour operators view local suppliers as partners; that is, the relationship goes beyond purely commercial terms, and there is no tendency to aggressive negotiations.”

An essential element in the relationship with stakeholders is continuity. As Davolio points out, “our tour operators usually have long-standing and loyal relationships with their suppliers [...] if a supplier ensures a good level of loyalty and quality, they are not replaced. There is no constant search for new suppliers; instead, existing relationships are strengthened, creating a level of trust that allows suggestions for further improving the tourism offer.” Continuity, therefore, becomes the foundation for a constructive and ongoing exchange, based on synergy, dialogue, and shared responsibility. According to Marletto, it is precisely the organisation’s ability to work in harmony with local partners that enables the creation of value. In addition, stable relationships allow tour operators to support the continuous

improvement of supplier practices, particularly in terms of environmental sustainability. Davolio highlights that these partners are often encouraged to adopt better practices, such as waste management, reducing water and food waste, or eliminating single-use plastic, especially in areas lacking adequate infrastructure and resources.

This approach is also reflected in Planet Viaggi Responsabili's internal sustainability policy, which explicitly recognises the organisation's role in providing information, training, and support to local partners to help them enhance their sustainability practices. The organisation is committed to sharing good practices with its partners and encouraging positive change, while regularly monitoring their level of sustainability. For instance, Planet Viaggi Responsabili has taken part in cooperation projects in the tourism sector, offering training to local entrepreneurs to improve the environmental and social sustainability of their accommodation facilities. The training of local partners is therefore a key aspect for responsible tourism operators, as it helps develop lasting skills that can generate benefits even beyond the individual organised trips. Indeed, ViaggieMiraggi started training activities for its local partners after the first trips, once it became clear how important their role was.

5.1.4 Product Diversification

Responsible tourism travel proposals can generally be divided into two main categories, knowledge-based tourism and community-based tourism. To date, the analysed responsible tour operators focus primarily on the former. In this regard, Viaggi Solidali offers two distinct definitions. Knowledge-based tourism involves itineraries that cover multiple locations within the same country, with the aim of exploring historical landmarks, natural beauty, and, above all, the traditions of local communities. Special attention is given to organising encounters with civil society organisations linked to the solidarity economy network, as well as with representatives of international cooperation projects. Community-based tourism, on the other hand, consists of itineraries in which tourists are hosted by families or other

local social groups and spend most of their time with residents, sharing their daily routines, lifestyle, and participating in everyday activities.

The prevalence of knowledge-based tourism over community-based tourism in the current offering of responsible tour operators can be attributed to the principle, as highlighted in *section 5.1.1*, of preserving a distinct touristic dimension within the travel experience. According to Davolio, community-based tourism typically occurs in areas where conventional tourism is absent, “small, usually remote, rural or mountainous communities, where the only available offer is that of the local community itself.” Furthermore, as Marletto explains, “community-based tourism was once understood as a model in which a local community, such as the *riverinos* in the Brazilian Amazon, would host tourists for several days, offering accommodation and experiences directly within the community. The tour operator’s role was limited to that of facilitator or intermediary, mainly responsible for selling the travel experience.” However, he notes that this type of tourism is no longer practiced by Viaggi Solidali because “it no longer works well, as it is very niche, at least for our target audience.” Hence, the absence of a recognisably “touristic” component made it less appealing and less sustainable in the long term.

As a result, knowledge-based tourism emerges as the most developed form of responsible tourism among the tour operators analysed. As Marletto observes, “what was once called knowledge-based tourism has become the format of our trips.” This form of tourism does include many elements traditionally linked to community-based tourism, but these elements are integrated in a way that enhances, rather than replaces, the core touristic experience of the journey.

Within the macro-category of knowledge-based tourism, each tour operator develops a wide range of offerings, as for Viaggi Solidali, which has “over one hundred proposals”. This is mainly because, as analysed above, the market they target is quite broad and diverse. By specialising their offer through different types of trips, operators manage to meet the needs of a heterogeneous clientele. This strategy enables them to attract groups of consumers with varying preferences and characteristics, offering diversified experiences ranging from cultural trips to nature, educational or adventure tourism. Moreover, such customisation allows customers to

select the tourism product that best suits their specific needs and desires, enhancing the overall experience and increasing tourist satisfaction. In this way, each organisation can respond more efficiently to the expectations of a growing public that is increasingly oriented towards authentic experiences. In fact, in its 2023 financial report, ViaggieMiraggi emphasises the organisation's commitment to developing new products and consolidating those created in previous years.

The two main types of travel offered are group travel and tailor-made trips. Within these two categories, there is a further level of product diversification aimed at providing more specialised and unique experiences for different types of travellers. Planet Viaggi Responsabili emphasises its commitment to further specialise its travel proposals, underscoring the strategic importance of this operation. Similarly, Viaggi Solidali has used six years of valuable feedback from both travellers and host communities to refine and diversify their offerings. They have created a themed travel calendar, which classifies their proposals based on specific themes such as environmental sustainability, cultural immersion, and social responsibility. This thematic approach helps travellers more easily choose the type of "solidarity" experience that best aligns with their personal interests and values.

Group travel, at its core, is designed around experiential-relational tourism, encompassing all the key elements of responsible travel experiences we have seen before. These journeys can then be further tailored with specific thematic focuses, providing a more specialised experience for travellers.

For instance, walking trips are based on a slow tourism that respects the environment. These trips include activities such as trekking, walking and hiking trails that combine responsible tourism with the practice of exploring places on foot, allowing travellers to fully immerse themselves in the territory while minimising their environmental impact. Another type is that of trips centred on biodiversity. These itineraries take place in areas of high natural value and are organised in collaboration with entities engaged in sustainable development and biodiversity protection projects. Travellers thus have the opportunity to discover and actively contribute to the conservation of ecosystems, working alongside local communities to preserve the natural heritage. Adventure trips, on the other hand, are designed to meet the needs

of those seeking a bold experience. The journeys incorporate the principles of responsible tourism; travellers use public transportation, stay primarily in hostels, and embrace a backpacker lifestyle. Another category is wellness travel, which places a strong focus on the participants' psychophysical well-being. For example, ViaggieMiraggi offers travel packages that combine responsible tourism with practices such as Forest Bathing, Yoga, Shiatsu and other forms of self-care. A highly relevant offering is represented by accessible travel. Organised by organisations such as Planet Viaggi Accessibili and ViaggieMiraggi, these trips are designed to meet the needs of people with disabilities, offering inclusive itineraries that provide multisensory experiences. These experiences are designed to be inclusive and immersive, while offering meaningful encounters and staying true to the values of responsible tourism.

With regards to the tailor-made category of travel product offering, one of the most popular proposals is the responsible honeymoon. These are fully customisable packages that combine moments of relaxation with authentic experiences that respect the destinations visited.

Another significant category, designed specifically for the school target, is that of educational trips. In the 2023 financial report of ViaggieMiraggi, it is stated that group travel and school trips have seen significant growth, thereby “expanding our target audience to include young people and children, a segment we are increasingly able to reach and positively influence with our message.” Tour operators design itineraries that allow students to explore places through a critical and responsible lens, addressing key topics such as legality, migration, and the social and cultural dynamics of visited areas, without overlooking their beauty and historical richness. Compared to traditional responsible tourism trips for adults, these educational journeys are tailored to the age and learning goals of the participants, seeking a balance between the traditional school trip and the innovative approach of responsible tourism.

5.2 Value Delivery

The second component of the analysis examines how responsible tourism organisations deliver the value they create, specifically, how this value is distributed and made available to customers. Drawing on Caroli (2021), and focusing on customer relationships and distribution channels as identified in the second aggregate dimension developed using the Gioia Methodology (*Figure 7*), value delivery is characterised by a “direct and continuous customer relationship”.

5.2.1 Customer Relationship

In the process of delivering value to the customers, the relationship with the customer itself plays a vital role. Communication with travellers is continuous, multi-phased, and multi-method. Before departing, the organisations implement a proper travel preparation strategy, which includes providing “training” for travellers through meetings and informational handouts. To prep meetings can be invited expert local partners to help both travellers and host communities prepare for meaningful exchanges. Furthermore, tour operators arrange meetings not only to present and introduce the destination to the customer, but to encourage participants to connect with each other in order to build a cohesive travel group. The key aspects covered during the preparatory meeting, according to ViaggieMiraggi, include: introductions and participants’ expectations for the trip; how the journey was created and who the local partners are; an overview of the travel documents; useful information about the destination to better understand the country; recommended reading materials; and a clear explanation of the price breakdown, travel contract, and financial details.

Hence, to make sure that travellers are well-informed and aware of the social, environmental, and cultural context of the destination, the trip organiser provides essential information both before and during the journey. This includes details not only about the historical, artistic, cultural, and natural heritage of the places visited, but also about their economic, political, environmental, and social realities. Travellers

receive materials outlining the principles of responsible and solidarity tourism, along with practical guidelines on appropriate behaviour; advice on clothing, photography, tipping, bargaining, gift-giving, interacting with locals, and respecting cultural heritage, wildlife, and the environment.

After returning home, travellers are often encouraged to stay connected with the host communities or to continue supporting solidarity projects met during the trip. For instance, Viaggi Solidali also occasionally organises targeted fundraising campaigns in response to local emergencies. Planet Viaggi Responsabili highlights that “travelling means starting a relationship that continues, one that does not end after just two or three weeks of vacation a year.” For Viaggi e Miraggi, another important aspect is maintaining a strong network of travellers through online and offline events, as well as initiatives aimed at engaging the community, such as collecting content for social media and the website.

Central to customer relationship management is the element of the feedback, collected from travellers upon their return, through an evaluation questionnaire. Specifically, travellers are encouraged to assess their experience not only in terms of comfort and quality but also with respect to the principles and practices of responsible tourism. Davolio highlights the operational value of this tool, stating that “tour operators have an evaluation questionnaire for travellers through which any criticisms emerge, and both the tour operators and local partners must take these into account.” In this sense, the evaluation form acts as a form of quality control and represents a valuable contribution from travellers to the certification process of responsible tourism. It is specifically designed to improve the organisation of services and the performance of local partners. Based on this feedback, organisations can gather suggestions, receive recommendations, and enhance their future travel offerings. Marletto, on the other hand, emphasises the role of this tool in identifying the organisation’s value proposition. According to him, the evaluation questionnaire provides insight into how the organisation creates value for its customers from the perspective of the customer itself.

5.2.2 Promotion and Distribution Activities

The main channel that responsible tour operators use for promoting and selling their products is the organisation's official website, where users can find detailed information about the trips and their pricing, as well as make reservations or sign up without commitment. In addition to the website, promotion is also carried out through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as through regular newsletters, targeted mainly at returning customers; as both Davolio and Marletto point out, the level of customer retention is very high. Additionally, ViaggieMiraggi occasionally hosts live sessions on Instagram to present selected trips. Participation in trade fairs is another key promotional strategy used by the tour operators. Taking part in fairs focused on ethical consumption and sustainable lifestyles, such as the annual "*Fa' la cosa giusta!*" fair, provides an important platform to raise awareness about responsible tourism and find potential customers. As Marletto explains, Viaggi Solidali also takes part in fairs and events tailored to specific audiences. For example, to promote their walking travel experiences, they participate in events that attract hiking enthusiasts, while their cycling trips are promoted at dedicated cycling fairs. ViaggieMiraggi also engages in dissemination events, either organised directly by the cooperative or in collaboration with partner organisations, and festivals.

Both Davolio and Marletto point out that word of mouth from past travellers plays a crucial role in raising awareness and generating interest among potential customers. Additionally, tour operators produce promotional materials, such as brochures, posters, and display stands, for distribution in fair trade shops. These shops also occasionally host travel presentation events to introduce upcoming trips and engage directly with interested participants.

With regard to distribution methods, as highlighted by the President of AITR, there is a substantial difference between conventional tour operators and those operating in the responsible tourism sector. The latter do not rely on retailer travel agencies but instead adopt a direct sales model, primarily through their own digital channels, particularly their official websites. This choice is driven by the need to

preserve the ethical identity that defines the offer of responsible tourism. According to Davolio, involving commercial intermediaries in the sales process could dilute the core values of the offering, making it more difficult to maintain coherence with the product and convey its uniqueness to the end customer.

In line with this view, Marletto identifies two main reasons behind the decision not to distribute travel packages through intermediaries. First, responsible tourism products are not standardised or mass-produced according to the logic typical of conventional tourism. Unlike traditional tour operators, who aim to sell large volumes of pre-packaged trips (e.g., week-long resort stays in the Maldives), responsible tour operators develop itineraries on a much smaller and more customised scale. As a result, both from an economic standpoint and as a marketing strategy, relying on intermediation proves neither efficient nor aligned with their values. Secondly, responsible tourism is characterised by a strong relational component and relies heavily on word-of-mouth as a primary promotional tool. In this context, a direct and continuous relationship with the customer is a key strategic asset. The opportunity for the potential customer to engage with individuals who know the destination firsthand and have been involved in designing the itinerary significantly contributes to the perceived value of the experience. Unlike traditional travel agencies, where front-office staff often merely present catalogue-based packages without in-depth destination knowledge, responsible tour operators offer direct contact with those who have crafted the travel experience. This connection allows the client to access deep, contextualised, and authentic knowledge of the destination, something that cannot easily be transmitted through intermediaries. This approach emphasises personalisation and transparency in the customer-operator relationship, which are central to building consumer trust and loyalty.

One feature that emerges across several of the tour operator business models analysed is the use of non-binding pre-registration. This practice addresses both commercial and operational purposes. It is typically used to allow the organisation to send an accurate quote to the customer on their request, and to have an early indication of how many people might be interested in the product. This tool proves particularly useful in the context of responsible tourism, where tour operators tend to

work on a small scale, with non-standardised itineraries and predominantly on group travel. These characteristics make the operational process of defining costs and revenues somewhat more complex compared to that of conventional tour operators – a point that will be examined in more detail in *Section 5.3*. Unlike the latter, responsible tour operators cannot easily set a fixed price per person regardless of the group size. Instead, the cost per participant, and thus the final price, varies according to the actual numerical composition of the group.

Marletto offers a detailed explanation of the reasoning behind this approach. Referring to *Viaggi Solidali*, he describes non-binding pre-registration as a “commercial invention” which, in their specific model, goes hand in hand with a predetermined small group supplement. When a new trip is launched, there is often uncertainty about reaching the minimum number of participants required to confirm the departure. As he explains, “The problem was always: I need at least six people, and I have the first four, what do I tell them? The first four are ready to book, but I can’t confirm the trip because the other two are still missing.” If not managed properly, this situation can lead to the loss of already interested clients, undermining early promotional efforts. To overcome this obstacle, the organisation developed a system whereby trips are initially published with a base price calculated for an ideal group of eight participants. However, there is also the option to confirm the trip with a smaller group, typically four, by applying a specific supplement, clearly stated from the outset. Marletto emphasises the transparency of this mechanism, “We register participants with a contract that includes the supplement. It is not a surprise.” Once the minimum group size is reached, the supplement is removed from the contract, providing travellers with a perceived benefit. This approach not only reinforces a sense of trust and fairness in the customer relationship but also allows bookings to begin from the very first expressions of interest, making the sales process smoother and more efficient. Marletto sees this strategy as a distinctive strength. In fact, the system offers a practical solution to managing the risk associated with demand uncertainty, while also making the trip accessible to smaller groups, in line with the principles of flexibility and transparency that characterise responsible tourism model.

5.3 Value Capture

The third component of the analysis focuses on how responsible tour operators capture value, which Chesbrough et al. (2018, p. 933) define as “the process of securing financial or nonfinancial return from value creation.” In addition, Sjödin et al. (2019, p. 161) highlight that value capture also involves distributing the profits of value creation “among participating actors such as providers, customers, and partners.” As reflected in the third aggregate dimension developed through the Gioia Methodology (*Figure 7*), the value capture activities of the selected case studies centre on the concept of “inclusive economic growth”. Indeed, unlike traditional tour operators’ business models centred on profit maximisation, these organisations pursue an alternative logic of value capture, based on fair distribution, community reinvestment, and economic transparency. In line with the criteria set by AITR, the organisations must ensure that the price paid by travellers is fair for all parties involved: tourists, operators, and local communities, and that all stakeholders are adequately compensated. As such, trips are organised according to the principles of transparency and equity throughout the value chain, with the explicit objective of ensuring that the value captured reaches ordinary people and is redistributed locally. These characteristics enable the business model to generate inclusive economic growth.

5.3.1 Pricing Strategy and Economic Transparency

A common feature across all case studies is the transparent communication of travel costs through a detailed price breakdown. In practical terms, tour operators can provide travellers with a document, along with the travel contract and general terms and conditions, that explains how the total price is divided across the main cost categories. This helps travellers understand how the cost of the trip is shared among the different stakeholders involved and how much of what they pay actually stays with the local communities.

The items that make up the cost of the trip may vary slightly depending on the tour operator, but generally include the participation fee, a shared travel fund, and, in some cases, the per-person solidarity contribution. The participation fee is the main cost item and may or may not include airfare. It always covers the fee for the tour operator, which funds the planning and coordination of the trip, preparatory training activities and all expenses incurred for services provided during the trip. This fee is paid in advance, before departure. In addition, travellers are asked to bring a common fund, i.e. a suggested amount of money that travellers use to cover expenses on-site. The management of the shared travel fund can happen in different ways, sometimes each participant handles their own share independently; other times, an actual common fund is created and managed by the group itself or by the tour leader.

Finally, as Davolio points out, some tour operators, but not all, include a per-person contribution, also called a project fee or solidarity fee, which each participant pays to support the projects visited during the trip. This amount collected from all travellers is entirely allocated to a development fund and donated to local projects or NGOs that partner with the tour operator to implement community initiatives. A concrete example is that of Viaggi Solidali, whose development fund “has over time distributed more than 500,000 Euro to support small local development projects.” With regard to the solidarity fund, Davolio adds a specific characteristic: “the donation must always be given collectively, not to an individual person, and sometimes even in the presence of the travellers themselves, who can then see exactly where the money is going.” He further explains that “if, for example, the money goes to a medical clinic, a library, or a kindergarten, the travellers not only donate but also visit the specific facility in question.” However, not all operators share this approach. Planet Viaggi Responsabili, for instance, takes a different view on this “In the egalitarian logic in which we conceive and construct our trips, we consider it unnecessary and even misleading to include a project fee [...] as it reinforces a charity-based view of development. For us, the trip is the ‘project quota’.” To conclude, about these two contrasting points of view, Davolio remarks that “They are two schools of thought in dialogue, each with its own motivations and legitimacy.”

Furthermore, it is important to point out that the principle of price transparency comes with certain challenges. As Davolio explains, one of the main

issues is that true transparency, meaning the ability to clearly and in detail communicate how each part of the traveller's fee is used, can only be achieved once the trip is over, when all costs and the allocation of resources are fully known. He further notes that, over time, some of the more specific aspects of this practice have gradually faded or been reduced, likely due to the complexity of putting it into practice and the difficulty of maintaining a consistent and verifiable level of transparency.

Another aspect to take into consideration: when comparing prices with more conventional travel offers, two different perspectives emerge. On one hand, ViaggieMiraggi communicates on its website that travellers should not expect the same level of service as that offered by large tour operators, who often work with experienced local agencies specialising in traditional tourism. This, they explain, accounts for the price difference; for instance, a trip to Madagascar from their catalogue costs significantly less than one offered by mainstream operators. On the other hand, Davolio presents a contrasting view, stating that prices in responsible tourism are often higher, even though the facilities are less luxurious. This, as he explains, is due to factors such as the difficulty of negotiating flight prices for small groups, limited bargaining power in general, and, most importantly, the commitment of tour operators to treating local service providers (accommodation, food, transport, guides) as partners who deserve fair compensation. According to Davolio, the higher cost is justified to customers by emphasising the distinct nature of responsible travel, which offers richer experiences, deeper connections with local communities, and meaningful encounters that conventional tourism typically cannot provide. In this sense, the price reflects the very values and features that define responsible tourism, and as previously noted, the costs are communicated transparently. This contrast in views highlights how, depending on the tour operator or the destination, costs and, therefore, prices can vary, as well as in comparison to mass tourism offerings.

5.3.2 Distributed Economic Impact

The value capture central concept is inclusive economic growth. Meaning that a verifiable share of the money spent by tourists goes directly to the countries in which the tour operator is active and is fairly reinvested in the local economy. Thus, responsible tourism trips are meant to boost the economies of the destination countries by leaving the majority of the profits with the local populations, in contrast to mass tourism, which exports most of its earnings. The goal of responsible tour operators is to enhance the local economy and prevent tourism losses.

As mentioned in *Section 5.1.3*, local providers are considered partners, emphasising the importance of creating equitable economic relationships. Consequently, as a principle of responsible tourism, they should receive fair compensation for their services, with appropriate payment terms and the most stable relationship possible. Furthermore, tour operators neither demand nor offer exclusivity agreements. In its presentation, Planet Viaggi Responsabili states, “Our relationships with local partners are based on the understanding that today’s tourism represents a genuine growth opportunity for local communities.” Tour operators support the local host communities by directly purchasing tourism products and services, a strategy that involves selecting a network of suppliers deeply rooted in the local economy. Instead of opting for large hotel chains or conventional incoming tour operators, they choose rather small, often family-run businesses that receive remuneration, either directly or through non-governmental organisations, for the hospitality provided. This compensation can represent a significant portion of a family’s annual income. Davolio, with regards to the transformative power of economic redistributive mechanisms, argues that “On the supplier side, the advantage lies in the fact that these partners are selected for their commitment to working even in areas that are not yet developed for tourism. The presence of tourists, however, can spark meaningful economic development. When multiple responsible tour operators include these destinations in their itineraries, a local micro-economy can emerge. This, in turn, creates opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship, particularly among young people, helping to counteract emigration, depopulation, and the ageing

of local communities. The economic and social impact can be highly significant.” Hence, the key concept is that the tour operator’s activities must be structured to promote fair and sustainable development in the destination countries, ensuring long-term continuity.

Additionally, to further support the local economy, tour operators support development projects promoted in the destination. As mentioned in the section above, they can establish a solidarity fund by collecting donations from travellers to financially support local community projects that are chosen in close collaboration with local partners. Furthermore, to boost the economic impact on the local community, travellers are encouraged to purchase locally produced food products and authentic handicrafts, thereby increasing the economic benefits for the local population and reducing import leakages.

Finally, in practical terms, taking the case of the tour operator Viaggi Solidali, it has been reported that between 30% and 40% of the generated revenue is directly allocated to pay for tourism services provided by local suppliers. In addition to this percentage, there is also the common fund - the amount of money spent directly by participants during the trip. Furthermore, when looking at the percentage, it is important to consider that the cost of airfare represents a significant portion of the total trip cost, often making up a large part of the overall expenses.

5.3.3 Organisational Financial Sustainability

As Davolio notes, “Our tour operators, like all tour operators, need to make a profit. By doing so, they are able to pay their employees and generate a surplus.” Therefore, as discussed in *Section 5.3.1*, a quota of the participation fee paid by the traveller is allocated to the tour operator.

According to ViaggieMiraggi, the share allocated to the organisation is similar, in terms of percentage on the final price, to that of traditional tour operators. However, what sets it apart is the high level of transparency. As the cooperative explains, “A traditional tour operator sells trips with an average mark-up (on the total

price) of 25%. On top of this, a commission for the intermediary travel agency is added (which ranges from 10% to 20%).” In the case of responsible tour operators, this commission is not present, as they do not use intermediary travel agencies for selling their products. ViaggieMiraggi further clarifies, “Our cooperative, on the other hand, sets a fixed profit margin, which represents around 13% to 20% of the total trip cost. The traveller is our direct customer.”

Marletto, Founder of Viaggi Solidali provides an in-depth explanation of the process by which the organisation’s mark-up is determined, and the cost-based price construction of the trip. As he explains, the process begins with the development of a preliminary cost study, which distinguishes between two main categories of expenses: fixed individual costs, which remain unchanged regardless of the number of participants (e.g. the cost of overnight accommodation), and group costs, which are shared among the participants (e.g. the rental of a vehicle). The sum of these two components results in an estimated total cost per person, calculated based on a minimum number of participants. A forecasted mark-up, usually between 15% and 25%, is then applied to this base, representing the margin needed to ensure the financial sustainability of the organisation. However, as Marletto points out, this percentage is not fixed but can be adjusted according to market conditions: if the same type of offer is significantly cheaper than similar options available on the market, a higher mark-up can be applied; on the contrary, in the case of low margins, it may be necessary to reduce the mark-up or revise the cost structure. This approach confirms that price-setting in responsible tourism is not the result of automatic accounting formulas, but rather a dynamic balance between sustainability, transparency and competitiveness.

Finally, when delving into the details of the cost structure, it is essential to consider the unique characteristics of operating within a responsible tourism model. The President of AITR highlights that, unlike conventional tour operators, price negotiation with local partners in responsible tourism business models is limited. “The local supplier sets the price, and the tour operator generally accepts it without lengthy negotiations.” In other words, there is no aggressive bargaining, as is common with traditional tour operators. Moreover, conventional tour operators, due to their large-scale operations, can enter into buy-in agreement with suppliers. Under

these agreements, tour operators purchase a fixed amount of services in advance at a much lower price, assuming the risk that these may not be sold. In contrast, for responsible tour operators working on a small scale and with small groups, this approach is unfeasible. Therefore, the responsible tour operator typically works with allotment agreements, but always on a small scale. For example, they do not block a large number of rooms in a hotel for an entire season, which results in limited negotiating margins and the necessity to accept the published rates. In particular, when it comes to flights, unlike large conventional tour operators who charter flights to specific destinations, responsible tourism operators, working with much smaller groups, are unable to secure lower prices than those publicly available. Viaggi Solidali specifies that “for international trips, we use scheduled flights with major national airlines. During the low season, we make individual named bookings for each traveller, whereas in the high season, we make block bookings for many of our planned destinations”.

In addition to the above characteristics, there are specific management costs to consider. For instance, Viaggi Solidali reports the cost of monitoring and managing the development fund, “Monitoring this aspect, both in terms of impact and local management, has never been easy. By our choice, we have always fully allocated the collected funds raised without deducting anything for the very complex management costs involved.” Moreover, “This monitoring has only been possible thanks to the volunteer work of the members, who dedicate their limited time outside their demanding professional commitments, given the nature of local suppliers.” A further key management cost to be considered concerns the IT infrastructure required to organise and manage the trips. Traditional tour operators rely on standardised management software, designed for rigid and well-structured operational models, where travel packages are fixed and standardised. However, responsible tourism tour operators operate in a much more flexible and tailored manner. This flexibility makes mainstream management software inadequate, as it is not designed to adapt to such a dynamic offer construction. For instance, as Marletto points out, the business choice to apply a supplement for small groups cannot be easily integrated into standard management software.

5.4 Conceptualising the “Human-Centred” Business Model

Based on the findings of the analysis, outlined in the above sections, this paragraph proposes a conceptualisation of the developed unified framework as a “human-centred” business model, as it emerges from the practices of responsible tour operators selected as case studies. In the authors’ conceptualisation, the “human-centred” business model is defined as a business model in which value creation, delivery, and capture processes are centred on the well-being of all individuals involved in the organisation’s operations, either directly or indirectly. By placing the human and the well-being of individuals at the core of the business model, the organisation integrates all three dimensions of sustainability – socio-cultural, economic, and environmental – into its operations. This holistic approach enables the “human-centred” business model to create sustained and authentic value for the customer through a co-creation process with local stakeholders, while also respecting the socio-cultural and environmental context of the destination. Moreover, by focusing the value delivery process on the intrinsic qualities of human relationships, the model ensures value is delivered in the most direct and meaningful way. Finally, by redistributing captured economic value to local service providers and supporting local development projects, the model generates positive externalities for the destination community as a whole. Hence, in the authors’ conceptualisation of the “human-centred” business model, the well-being of individuals is understood in an integrated manner, encompassing socio-cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability, as a means to promote the overall well-being of individuals.

Value is created for the final customer through practices that respect all stakeholders involved in the value creation activities, the local community, and the destination’s social and environmental context. Indeed, in this model, the value proposition is developed by fairly and mindfully leveraging what the local population is able to offer, meaning that the individuals of the local community become active co-creators of the tourist experience, and that destination resources are used responsibly and sustainably to ensure long-term benefits for both visitors and residents. The uniqueness of the value offered to travellers stems precisely from the

interpersonal exchanges that take place through encounters with the local community, making the human element the core of the value created for the customer. Intercultural exchange is, in fact, an essential component of this model, where tourists are welcomed as friends rather than as tourists, creating a relationship-based value proposition rooted in authentic personal connection. Within this logic, the traveller does not act as an external spectator and consumer but rather as an active part of the experience itself. While in mass tourism models, the product is the focus of the offering, in the “human-centred” business model, it is the human relationship. Furthermore, value is co-created with destination stakeholders, such as local partners, tour leaders, local economy suppliers, and representatives of local development projects. The relationship the organisation establishes with these actors is not purely transactional, but rather human-centred, built on mutual respect, continuous collaboration and shared growth.

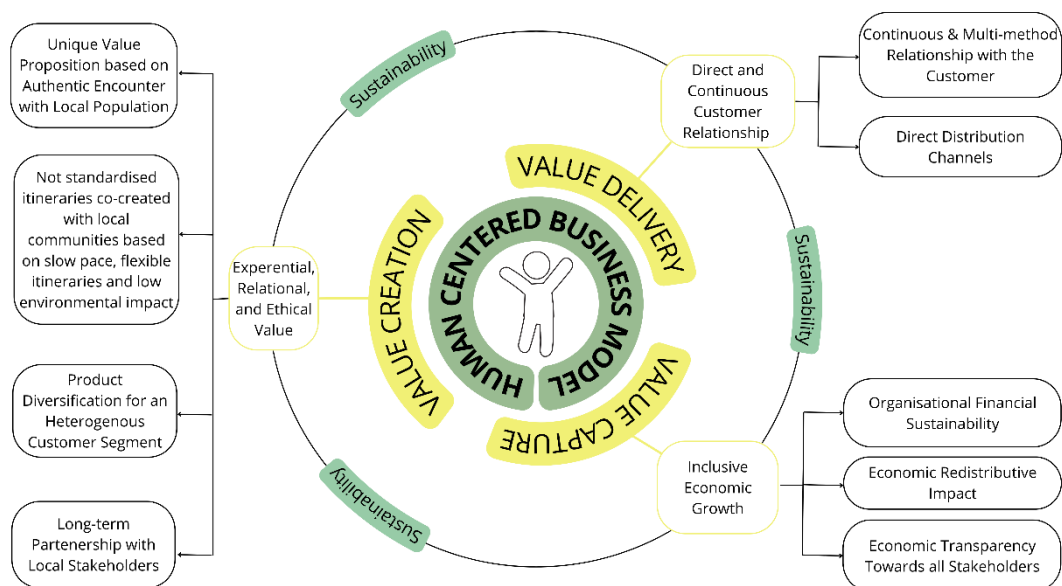
The conceptualisation of the “human-centred” business model from the perspective of value delivery lies in the fact that value is delivered primarily through personal and direct relationships established with the customer. These relationships are, in fact, established between the organisation and the final customer before, during, and after the trip, as well as between local stakeholders and the final customer during the travel experience itself. In this sense, human relationships become essential to the delivery of value. Furthermore, the human element is also highlighted within the distribution activities, which are also based on direct contact with the customers, enabling them to get in touch directly with those who have developed the travel product. These interactions can become part of the value creation process itself, as the customer, through direct exchange with those who organise and deliver the travel experience, gains added value from the relationship itself.

Finally, the developed unified framework can be conceptualised as a “human-centred” business model also from the perspective of value capture. In this model, we have seen above that value is created based on principles of respect and inclusion of the individuals within the local community, consequently, it is not captured solely by the organisation. While the organisation aims to achieve financial sustainability, which is necessary to ensure its long-term operation, this goal is pursued alongside two key elements. The first element is that of economic transparency towards all

stakeholders, including both the final customers and all actors across the value chain. The second element is characterised by the organisation’s commitment to the redistribution of economic value, whereby the monetary value captured from end customers is shared fairly and equitably with the local community. This is achieved not only through fair remuneration of the local service providers but also by financially supporting local social and environmental development projects. Thus, rather than focusing on profit maximisation, this model, centred on the well-being of individuals, aims to generate a wider positive economic impact on the local destination.

The conceptualisation of the “human-centred” business model, grounded in the analysis findings, is graphically summarised in *Figure 8*. The figure outlines the key elements of the unified framework developed from the analysis of the business models adopted by the responsible tour operators, highlighting the distinctive features that form the foundation of its conceptualisation as a “human-centred” business model, that is, a business model built around the individuals and their well-being.

Figure 8. *Graphical Representation of Responsible Tour Operators’ Business Model*



Source: Author’s own elaboration

Chapter 6. Discussion

This chapter discusses the results of the analysis presented in the previous chapter in relation to the main research question. The discussion is developed across three main sections. Firstly, the “human-centred” business model of responsible tourism tour operators (graphically summarised and represented in *Figure 8*) is discussed in comparison to the business model of conventional tour operators. This is done drawing on the work of Yarcan and Çetin (2021) who provide a detailed description of the operational model typical of mass tourism tour operators. This comparison allows for the identification of key operational differences between the two models, placing the one developed through the data analysis and presented in *Chapter 5* within a broader industry context. Furthermore, this comparison lays the ground for a critical reflection on the potential scalability of the model and its potential transformative capacity in relation to the dominant mass tourism paradigm. The comparison between the two models is also visually summarised through a comparative table, highlighting the main features of responsible and traditional business models.

Serving as a bridge between the first and second sections is a discussion on the recent shift by some large mass tourism operators towards sustainable and, at times, responsible tourism practices. This shift is discussed in terms of the extent to which this is perceived by responsible tour operators as a potential threat.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the discussion of the model’s potential for scalability and the role of responsible tour operators as a transformative force for driving a paradigm shift in the tourism industry. Based on the research findings, the existing literature, and insights that emerged in the interviews conducted with Maurizio Davolio and Enrico Marletto, the author reflects on the potential for large-scale adoption of such a responsible business model and its possible contribution to transformative change in the tourism industry. The chapter concludes by discussing the main limitations of the research and presenting final considerations.

6.1 Comparing the Business Models of Responsible and Conventional Tour Operators

According to Yarcan and Çetin (2021, p. 14) “a tour operator assembles different parts of travel services, mainly ground travel services and international transportation, to produce an organized packaged tour.” Although this mechanism serves as the basis for value creation for both mass-market and responsible tour operators, in the case of responsible tourism, it is articulated through fundamentally different principles and characteristics.

Responsible tour operators aim to create experiential value based on human interaction and the meaningful encounter with the local population, making the product unique. Indeed, the relationships established between the traveller and the host community, enabled by the organisation’s activity of value creation, are inherently authentic and non-replicable. Additionally, the narration of the destination from the point of view of local community members and the presence of a local tour leader throughout the trip enable an exchange of value and knowledge that is also difficult to replicate. In contrast, mass tour operators tend to offer standardised packages consisting of classic tourist services (transport, accommodation, excursions) at competitive prices, to provide the consumer with a product that includes all services; intercultural exchange and encounters with the local community are not part of their value proposition.

The responsible tour operator, therefore, in addition to producing an organised packaged tour assembling different services, aims to create experiential, relational, and ethical-economic value for the customer through a business model centred on people and the planet.

In the case of mass-market tour operators, the local community and the human aspect of the experience are not included in the process of value creation, meaning that the destination simply represents a component of the product, selected based on its commercial appeal and the ability to offer standardised packages. Hence, the focus is on the product. The main goal is to sell a standardised product made up of different commodified components on a large scale; as a result, again, the design process

revolves around the product, not the destination territory. In contrast, the responsible tour operator takes a radically different approach, the destination does not serve just as a “background” to the trip but as a central actor. As discussed in *Chapter 5*, before developing an itinerary, responsible tour operators conduct feasibility and impact studies to assess the area’s capacity to hold visitors, considering its social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Additionally, they conduct preliminary market research to ensure there is real demand for that type of experience, in order to avoid creating false expectations in the local communities.

On the dominant side of the paradigm, Yarcan and Çetin (2021) argue that if economic or environmental conditions in a destination deteriorate, mass-market holiday tour operators redirect tourist flows to other regions, locations, or types of tourism products. Because they offer standardised holiday packages, they can easily substitute one product with another; doing so, they are able to influence tourists’ travel decisions by offering similar experiences in alternative destinations. As a result of such strategies, service providers in the destinations become dependent on the tour operator. Thus, from the perspective of the relationship with the destination, the operating model of responsible tour operators significantly differs from that of mass tourism tour operators. In responsible tourism, the final product is defined by the destination and the local community itself; its intrinsic and distinctive uniqueness derives specifically from them. In fact, the value created for the traveller is the result of a shared process, where the local population is a key player, bringing their interests and expectations into the design of the tourism product. The local community is not a passive observer but an active participant in the value creation process. Thus, added value is co-created through collaboration among the local stakeholders, each contributing unique elements that enhance the distinctiveness of the experience, making it hard to replicate and thereby strengthening the destination’s competitiveness (Walker et al., 2024, *Introduction section*). For this reason, Yarcan and Çetin’s (2021) statement that traditional tour operators can offer “similar products at different destinations” does not apply to responsible tourism. In responsible tourism, the trip cannot be replicated elsewhere, as it is inherently tied to the social, cultural, and territorial context of the destination.

While in mass tourism, destinations are subordinated to the tour operators, who treat them as mere containers of the product and determine their economic dependence, in responsible tourism, there is no subordination. Instead, there is an equal partnership between the tour operator and the host community. Furthermore, a key difference between the two business models is the type of relationship established with the supply chain stakeholders, service providers. As the authors explain, mass tourism tour operators substitute and shift components of tour packages from one supplier to another for various reasons; the main reason being that this allows them to maintain a dominant position in the organised tourism market, which, in turn, enables them to pressure local suppliers into lowering production costs. As a result, frequently changing suppliers creates a dependency of local tourism enterprises on tour operators. In contrast, responsible tour operators develop relationships with local suppliers in the form of partnerships, ensuring fair compensation and involving minimal negotiation. Furthermore, the relationship between the tour operator and local partners is based on the principle of continuity, fostering an exchange that enables mutual growth. Therefore, the focus of the two models is different: one prioritises commercial power and cost minimisation, while the other aims to build relationships based on trust and respect, oriented towards mutual growth.

Moreover, in mass-market tour operators' business models, vertical integration is commonly used as a strategy to reduce transaction costs between the different entities involved in producing the final product (Yarcan and Çetin, 2021). This means that the tour operator directly owns or controls the companies operating within the supply chain. Such a structure enables the generation of economies of scale, thus reducing the overall cost of tour packages. As a result, the trend towards vertical integration allows tour operators to reduce operating costs and retain the majority of the revenues generated. Consequently, the economic value generated is dispersed in the tour operator's home country, rather than being redistributed in the destination economy. As a result, the positive economic impact on the local economy is severely limited.

Additionally, the authors explain that tour operators operating according to the logic of the mass tourism paradigm tend to direct demand towards destinations in which they have direct economic interests. This occurs, for instance, when the tour

operator has a stake in the ownership and management of the infrastructure hosting tourists, or when it controls an incoming tour operator that operates as an integral part of the corporate structure, as seen above. In contrast, responsible tour operators do not direct demand towards destinations in which they have physical or organisational investments, but instead they create the value prioritising destinations where cultural, social, economic and environmental local development projects are active, and that can be integrated into the trip. There is thus a shift from a logic driven by direct economic interest to one oriented towards the development of local communities. Economic exchange is still present and central, but it is defined by profoundly different dynamics and purposes.

In addition to the differing logics of the relationship built by the tour operator with the destination and local community and suppliers, another key element that distinguishes the business models of conventional and responsible tour operators is their approach to the customer relationship. As discussed in *Section 5.2*, mass tour operators typically distribute their products through intermediary retailer travel agencies and electronic channels, whether owned or managed by third parties (such as ICT companies). Responsible tour operators, on the other hand, require direct contact with the end customer, this is because their offering is unique and not standardised. Using an intermediary could risk diminishing this added value, as the agency, not being involved in the design process of the trip, would not be able to effectively communicate the unique features of the product. While an agency can easily sell a standardised package, responsible tourism packages are never identical: they vary depending on the destination, season, partners involved, and the needs of the host community. For this reason, the personalised and diverse nature of the offer makes intermediaries ineffective, or even harmful, as they may lead to a loss in the perceived value for the customer.

Therefore, establishing a direct relationship with the potential customer, starting from the sales phase, creates added value for the customer, who can receive detailed information directly from those who designed the experience and have direct connections with the local stakeholders involved. Moreover, in the responsible tourism model, the relationship does not end with the purchase; it continues throughout the entire customer journey: before departure, during the trip, and even

after the return. This creates an ongoing relationship between the traveller and the tour operator. In contrast, in mass tourism, where the products are standardised and the experience is commodified, the relationship with the customer is limited to the purchase transaction, potentially intermediated, and to the customer service during the trip.

As described by Yarcın and Çetin (2021), and previously outlined in *Chapter 5*, mass-market tour operators typically reserve or purchase in advance a significant portion of accommodation capacity, such as entire blocks of hotel rooms for a whole season or even for a year, and secure seats on commercial flights or charter entire planes. This large-scale operational logic is very different from the one adopted by responsible tour operators. Responsible tour operators operate in multiple destinations, offering a wide range of differentiated products, but on a small scale, travelling with groups of limited size. This, along with the peculiar nature of the local partners and the relationship established with them, entails limited economies of scale, lower bargaining power, and generally higher operational costs. Management costs are also high; the development of each tourism product requires continuous exchange with local partners and representatives of local development projects, who are actively involved in designing and delivering the experiences. Since the organised trips are rich in unique and authentic experiences, their planning and management require a deeply structured and highly detailed organisation, capable of ensuring high quality and alignment with the specificities of the host community and the specific needs of travellers themselves.

While mass-tourism operators aim to maximise profits and reduce costs to provide the customer with a fixed and low-price offering, responsible tour operators follow a business model that recognises at the same time the importance of organisational financial sustainability, and two essential dimensions, the redistribution of economic value in favour of the host community and economic transparency towards all stakeholders, including consumers.

Finally, in contrast to the mass-market tour operators' business model, responsible tour operators focus on creating experiential, relational, and ethical-economic value for the traveller. This value is created in partnership with the local

community, by working with local partners who are truly rooted in the community and who, in turn, rely on local service providers. The value captured by the organisation is shared with the entire social and economic ecosystem of the destination.

Table 2. *Key Distinctions between Tour Operators*

Area of Differentiation	Responsible Tourism Tour Operator	Mass-market Holiday Tour Operator
Value Creation - Value Proposition	Experiential, relational, and ethical-economic value, based on intercultural exchange and community encounters	Entertainment and relaxation: focused on convenience, comfort, leisure, and standardised service quality
Value Creation - Value Proposition	Focus on human relations, local people's narratives, authentic experiences, and consumption of places from a local point of view	Focus on leisure services, sightseeing, amenities, entertainment, staged authenticity of experiences, and mass-consumption of places
Value Creation - Key Internal Resources	Based on brand reliability, professional expertise, and in-depth destination knowledge	Based on brand image, mass marketing, high level of investments, standardised qualitative service expectations
Value Creation - Product Development	Co-created with local communities; includes lesser-known destinations, small groups (10–12 max), extended stays, relaxed and flexible itineraries	Designed centrally by operator; large groups, short stays, tight itineraries, limited interaction with locals, focused on mainstream, high-demand areas

Value Creation - Stakeholders / Supply Chain Management	Collaborate closely with local communities; emphasise empowerment and partnership	Bypasses local operator; extractive relationships; vertical integration of service providers for cost saving
Value Creation - Supply Chain Management	Long-term, equitable relationships with local suppliers; preference for family-run and locally owned businesses; limited economic leakage	Cost-based negotiations with large suppliers and international hotel chains; emphasis on bulk contracts and service standardisation; economic leakage (import and export) is common
Value Delivery - Customer Relationship	Continuous, multi-method, and multi-phased customer relationship; preparatory meetings	Limited interaction with customer beyond sales point; generic customer service models
Value Delivery - Channels	Sell directly to customers;	Intermediary retailer travel agencies;
Value Capture - Cost structure	Use scheduled flights with major national airlines; individual named bookings and block bookings	Charter flights to specific destinations; makes reservations from airlines in the form of seat blockage or allotment
Value Capture – Cost structure	Fair remuneration of local tourist service suppliers and reinvestment into the local community	Competitive pricing achieved through cost-cutting and economies of scale
Value Capture - Revenue Model	Organisational financial sustainability and redistributive economic impact; value distributed locally	Profit maximisation; high-volume sales; value dispersed, centralised profit capture in tour operator's home country

The literature review in *Chapter 3* tends to highlight the fundamental distinction between the integrative adoption of sustainable tourism practices and the adoption of an intrinsically sustainable business model. This distinction, to some extent, marks a dividing line between the business models of traditional tour operators and those of responsible tour operators, which, as this research shows, remain significantly different. However, to lay the theoretical and practical foundations for a shift in the dominant paradigm of the tourism industry, it is important, following the words of the President of the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism, not to emphasise an unbridgeable gap between those who organise responsible or solidarity-based tourism products and all other mass-market operators. Instead, the goal should be to move beyond viewing responsible tourism as a niche and to aim at influencing and transforming the conventional tourism industry. Based on this perspective, it is essential to include in the discussion the position of responsible tour operators in relation to conventional ones integrating into their traditional business model sustainable tourism practices, as of today, primarily focused on environmental sustainability, and in limited instances extended to the social and economic dimensions of sustainability.

In relation to this crucial aspect, and in line with what has been argued above, Davolio expresses satisfaction with the progressive improvement of ethical and sustainability standards that have been recorded in recent years within the conventional tourism industry. As discussed in the literature, this shift is the result of several factors, including a growing interest from consumers in more ethical and sustainable forms of tourism, as well as national regulations and tourism masterplans promoted by international organisations. Davolio emphasises that it is not essential to question whether the motivations behind the integration of sustainable and responsible tourism practices are ideological or commercial; rather, what matters is that these practices are adopted. However, both Davolio and Marletto, President and Founder of the tour operator Viaggi Solidali, highlight the growing risk of greenwashing. Consequently, the promotion of responsible tourism principles and practices is also accompanied by the need to protect them against misappropriation and superficial implementation.

Furthermore, Davolio points out that, although the tendency of mass-market tour operators to gradually, albeit partially, adopt the good practices and principles of responsible tourism is commendable, there are objective limitations that prevent a full convergence between the two models. Among these, for example, are the limited size of the groups and the methodical preparation of travellers before the trip. These elements, according to Davolio, remain beyond the operational reach of conventional tour operators. “They approach our principles, partially and progressively accept them, but their trips will never coincide with ours, because ours include aspects that they are unable to implement.”

6.2 Scalability

The central question guiding the concluding reflection of this research is, “Is it possible to reconcile the ethical identity of the responsible tourism model with large-scale expansion?”

This reflection stems from the observation of emerging signals that suggest a potential for large-scale expansion of the responsible tourism model, and the consequent potential shift in the dominant tourism paradigm. Two interconnected elements, one internal to the organisation and the other external, highlight concrete margins for the growth and large-scale diffusion of this operating model.

The first element, internal to the organisations, concerns the adaptability and operational flexibility of the business models adopted by responsible tour operators. Over the past two decades, these operators have shown their ability to respond to market changes by adapting to new conditions; for instance, by diversifying their offerings to meet the increasingly heterogeneous needs of an expanding customer base. Crucially, they have done so without compromising the ethical identity that defines them. A relevant example is Viaggi Solidali, which has successfully adjusted and evolved its operating model over time, displaying strategic flexibility. As Marletto notes, since its founding, Viaggi Solidali has gradually refined its managerial expertise in response to a continuously transforming and expanding

market, introducing, among other things, innovative managerial and commercial solutions such as the small group supplement. Furthermore, with regards to technological innovation - such as artificial intelligence which is revolutionising the tourism industry by offering tailored recommendations, increasing operational effectiveness and facilitating data-driven destination management (Tanrisever et al., 2024) - Marletto emphasises the importance of embracing innovation as an opportunity, while remaining faithful to the core values of responsible tourism. In doing so, the President and Founder of Viaggi Solidali reaffirms the organisation's openness to innovation, which must always go hand in hand with critical reflection and a commitment to preserving the organisation's ethical identity.

The second element, external in nature, concerns the evolution of tourist demand. Whereas responsible tourism once primarily attracted a niche of travellers strongly motivated by ethical and environmental reasons, we now witness a gradual broadening and hybridisation of its target audience. Indeed, the market is increasingly interested in authentic and sustainable travel experiences. As discussed in *Chapter 5*, responsible tour operators are now engaging in cross-market consumer outreach, due to the growing overlap between the conventional tourism market segment and that of responsible tourism.

There are, however, certain elements that may be interpreted as potential limits to the scalability of the business model adopted by responsible tour operators. Referring back to the constraints discussed in *Section 6.1*, identified as objective barriers to the full convergence of the two models under comparison, one may question whether these same factors might also act as barriers to scalability.

Elements such as the traveller's preparation before departure, the small size of travel groups, the ongoing and in-depth relationship built with the customer, the direct relationship with the host communities, and the co-creation of the tourist experience are not merely operational details. Rather, they are structural features of responsible tourism. As such, they may be considered as inherently incompatible with the logic of standardisation, automation, and optimisation of economies of scale, which instead constitute the core of scalability in traditional business models.

Alongside the concept of scalability, two critical questions emerge, which this work presents as points for reflection. These are raised not with the intention of providing definitive answers, but rather with the awareness that the complexity of the topic precludes univocal or conclusive responses.

The first question concerns the ability to manage a higher volume of consumers while remaining faithful to the core values of responsible tourism. Specifically, *could growth and expansion into a broader market lead to a progressive distancing of responsible tour operators from the principles on which their business models are built?* On this point, Davolio, President of AITR, observes that even in the face of significant growth among some of AITR's partner tour operators, no departures from fundamental principles have been observed to date. As he states, "There may be some adaptations, but overall, I have not seen any deviation from the fundamental principles, despite the growth of many of our tour operators." He also adds that, "Those who grow are exposed to greater risks, but I must say that so far there has been no compromise on the key principles: trip preparation, small groups, use of local providers, slow travel, meaningful encounters, environmental respect, and cultural sensitivity. These values have all remained intact." This perspective suggests that a virtuous form of scalability may be possible, as long as a strong adherence to the core values of responsible tourism is preserved. This concept will be further examined in the following section.

The second issue, more ethical in nature, emerges from two different perspectives: that of the consumer and that of the local community. It concerns the accessibility and economic impact of responsible tourism. Marletto questions whether, due to its inherent characteristics, this model may risk taking on an elitist character, becoming accessible only to a limited segment of consumers with a relatively high purchasing power. As he points out, "The responsible tourism model must not become a luxury accessible only to those who can afford it." Closely tied to this concept, though from the perspective of local communities, Marletto recalls a conversation he had during a trip to Senegal, in a village near Louga where tourists were hosted in family homes. The head of FESFOP (an African music festival) told him, "We could welcome many more people here," underlining that tourism represents a crucial economic opportunity for the community. This example

illustrates the tension between two equally legitimate interests: on the one hand, the responsible tour operator's commitment to preserving long-term social and environmental balance in the destination; on the other, the host community's desire for increased tourist flows as a means of exponentially improving local economic well-being, even if that might come at the cost of reduced sustainability.

The resulting question - *Who is right?* – does not lend itself to a single, definite answer. As Marletto observes, both perspectives are valid. The real challenge lies in finding a balance among the three dimensions outlined above: economic inclusivity from the demand side, the sustainability of tourism's impacts, and the positive economic effects on host communities.

In conclusion, the case of Perú Responsable, a long-standing AITR partner and the leading operator in the Italian market for travel to Peru, provides a concrete example of the potential scalability of the responsible tourism business model. As Davolio observes, the organisation “has demonstrated strong operational and commercial capabilities and is now a leader in travel to Peru.” This case, therefore, exemplifies how entrepreneurial growth can be successfully reconciled with a consistent commitment to core values. However, when scalability is viewed from a broader, collective perspective, a true paradigm shift towards more sustainable tourism, across its social, environmental, and economic dimensions, cannot rely solely on the success of individual cases. As Davolio points out, it is necessary to pursue “a broader diffusion of this model, which remains a clear minority within the industry, yet has nonetheless gained greater substance over the years.”

For the organisation to remain true to the core values of responsible tourism during its growth process, it is crucial that scalability remains centred on the individual. In this sense, Marletto argues that “development, or scalability, which is normally the other term associated with growth, must never be detached from the fundamental elements inherent to the phenomenon being discussed, namely, the well-being of people.” If it is recognised that human relationships are at the core of responsible tourism, then it becomes clear that there is an inherent limit to scalability; it is unrealistic to expect the entire world to adopt this style of travel exclusively. As Marletto points out, “The human dimension of travel has its limits.”

6.3 Limitations

Just as the business model proposed in this research has limitations related to its human dimension, this research is also not without its limitations. The first of these is related to the lack of a solid body of literature on responsible tourism and the organisations operating in this sector, a gap that this research aims to address. Indeed, the specific literature on responsible tourism tour operators' business model is generally absent, which, on one hand, opens up significant opportunities for future research, but on the other hand, limits the ability to identify more precise gaps to explore in a targeted way. Consequently, the research had to rely primarily on literature concerning sustainable tourism, which, as explored throughout the study, is heavily focused on the environmental aspects of sustainability. Furthermore, the literature review is predominantly centred on case studies of conventional tourism, with a particular emphasis on large organisations. On the other hand, the choice to analyse the business models of organisations in the field of responsible tourism was facilitated by the availability of a large body of literature on business models in general.

The second limitation, although not a strict restriction, concerns the selection of case studies. All the tour operators analysed are affiliated with the same organisation, the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism (AITR). While this might reduce the variability of the business models examined, the choice was made to ensure the sample's validity and robustness, as all selected operators are certified as responsible tourism operators. It is worth mentioning the presence of other organisations in the Italian responsible tourism sector that are not affiliated with AITR, such as ioViaggioResponsabile, Travel World Escape, Earth Viaggi, Orma Guides, and The Labyrinth, which could also serve as interesting case studies for the study of alternative business models. Nevertheless, the selected case studies, although all affiliated with the same entity, include some of the most significant players in the field of responsible tourism in Italy. With a total of 23 entities, the sample offers a broad and relevant representation of the sector.

A third limitation, inherent to the research, is the small number of interviews conducted. A larger number of interviews, for example, five, could have helped increase the validity and robustness of the results. However, this limitation is partially mitigated by the transparency of the tour operators selected as case studies for analysis, which allows for a fairly accurate reconstruction of their business models through the analysis of secondary data. Additionally, this limitation is further reduced by the specificity of the interview conducted with the President of the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism, which provides a comprehensive view of how the various tour operators function. Finally, the depth and duration of the interviews, each lasting one hour, allowed for an in-depth exploration of many relevant topics and aspects of the research, compensating for the small number of interviews with a greater richness of information.

6.4 Managerial Relevance

Once the limitations of this research are acknowledged, it is important to emphasise its managerial relevance within the emerging field of sustainable tourism, specifically responsible tourism. While this segment is gradually gaining importance in practice, in terms of visibility and development, it remains significantly underexplored in academic literature, which has yet to thoroughly investigate its operational dynamics. In this context, understanding the business model of organisations operating in responsible tourism becomes crucial for driving potential meaningful change within the tourism industry. Therefore, analysing the business models of selected responsible tour operators not only enhances academic understanding of the sector but might also provide valuable insights for industry professionals, who could draw inspiration from these models to integrate principles of economic, social, and environmental sustainability into their business strategies.

6.5 Conclusions

The research develops around a current global issue that, although frequently discussed, does not receive the attention it deserves in terms of either depth or innovative solutions development: the impacts of mass tourism. These impacts occur on multiple levels, including environmental, socio-cultural, and economic, potentially in that order of awareness. Although mass tourism is a major global economic sector, contributing about 10% of the world's GDP and creating numerous jobs, it also results in significant negative effects.

Hence the fundamental importance of understanding the mechanisms underlying this phenomenon. As discussed in *Chapter 2*, on one hand, its environmental effects can be large, as seen in the often-discussed case of Bali, where mass tourism has caused significant ecological damage. On the other hand, there are socio-cultural impacts, with local traditions at risk of extinction in favour of the creation of “authentic” staged tourist experiences. One example of this phenomenon is the alteration of cultural or religious events, where their timing and modalities are adjusted to meet the needs of tourists. Indeed, Bricker and Kariithi (2025, 3.4 *Reflecting forward... section*), summarise these two areas of mass tourism impact, arguing that, “[...] we all know that the development of tourism is accompanied by significant challenges in the form of nonrenewable energy-intensive transportation, both land and air; excessive water consumption when compared with residential use; increased discharges of untreated water; generation of waste; damage to terrestrial and marine biodiversity; and threats to enduring local cultures, heritage, and traditions within local communities.”

From an economic perspective, mass tourism models are often linked to leakage. This includes import leakage, where tourists consume services, such as accommodations, food, or products, that must be imported because they are not locally available, and export leakage, where a significant portion of the profits generated by tourism is transferred to the companies' home countries rather than being distributed and reinvested locally. Another related phenomenon is the existence

of “tourist enclaves”, i.e. areas where tourists consume all-inclusive vacation packages, as in cruises or resort villages. This type of tourism reduces interactions with the local market, population, and culture, thus limiting the economic benefits for local communities, which are left with the negative impacts of mass tourism.

Given the vastness and complexity of the tourism industry, which is further amplified by the phenomenon of overtourism, the research emphasises the need to analyse the foundations for a potential paradigm shift. This shift is crucial today and will be even more so in the future, given the expected continuous and exponential growth in international travel. Considering the points briefly outlined above and inspired by the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda, the research examines the sector of responsible tourism, through the analysis of the selected tour operators’ business models, not only as an alternative but also as a potential actor capable of fostering a change in the dominant paradigm. The research first identifies the existing gaps, both in literature and in practice, and conducts a literature review on two central aspects: mass tourism and sustainable tourism. It then develops the theoretical background at the intersection of three key elements: sustainable tourism, tour operators, and business models.

The research answers the following research question: *What are the key components of responsible tour operators’ business models, and how do they create, deliver, and capture value in line with sustainability principles to drive a paradigm shift in the tourism industry?* To do so, the study selects 23 tour operator partners of the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism (AITR) as case studies. It analyses their business models using primary and secondary data and develops a unified framework to describe these models, which is conceptualised as a “human-centred” business model. This unified framework can serve as a foundation for future analysis on the potential for the scalability of responsible tour operators’ business models to address a growing market and the need for a shift from the current dominant paradigm.

The main findings of the analysis are structured around the theoretical framework of value creation, value delivery, and value capture, and are developed based on the three aggregate dimensions that emerged from the data analysis

conducted using the Gioia Methodology. These findings conceptually address the three dimensions of the impacts generated by mass tourism and result in the conceptualisation of the “human-centred” business model.

Starting with value creation, as highlighted in the first aggregate dimension, “Experiential, relational and ethical value” is created for the final customer. Indeed, the strategy is oriented on experiential differentiation, based on the creation of a non-standardised product, characterised by two main elements: small group size and flexible, slow-paced itineraries. This product is developed through a co-design process with local communities, generating value for the final customer not only at the experiential level but also at the ethical-economic and relational levels. On the relational level, the travel experience promotes intercultural exchange, emphasising interactions with local communities. From an ethical-economic standpoint, the organisation’s offer is characterised by economic transparency and a redistributive impact, through the involvement of local actors in the value chain. The value proposition is based on a unique offering that is difficult to replicate, combining the traditional tourist experience with the element of the authentic encounter with local populations, complemented by the organised travel component. The unique value proposition can be summarised in the concept that travellers are welcomed as friends, not as tourists, meaning that they are enabled to experience the destination as locals. Environmental sustainability represents a core principle of value creation; in both product development and supply chain management, particular emphasis is placed on mitigating the environmental impacts of tourism and seeking more environmentally sustainable practices. Furthermore, value is created in collaboration with a range of stakeholders who genuinely represent the destination and are well integrated in the local community, including local partners, tour leaders, suppliers from the local economy, and representatives of local development projects. The type of relationship formed between the organisation and the supply chain stakeholders is a partnership based on continuity, mutual respect, and constant communication, allowing all parties to grow organically. The close relationship established between the organisation and the local service providers enables them to provide guidance, for instance, in terms of implementing more environmentally sustainable practices.

Value is delivered through a constant focus on the customer relationship, which, as highlighted by the second aggregate dimension that emerged through the data analysis, is developed through multi-channel and multi-phase communication. This continuous relationship, which begins before the sale and extends beyond the journey, is also reflected in the organisation's promotional and distribution activities. The direct ongoing interaction with the customer not only ensures that value is delivered to its fullest potential but also adds an extra element of value creation, as it fosters a more immersive and authentic experience. Finally, in terms of value capture, the business model of responsible tour operators differs significantly from conventional mass tourism models in that, rather than focusing on profit maximisation and cost minimisation, it is based on three interconnected elements of equal importance: the financial sustainability of the organisation, the redistributive economic impact on the destination, and economic transparency towards customers and all stakeholders in the value chain. These elements together represent the third aggregate dimension of "inclusive economic growth".

The three aggregate dimensions that emerged from the data analysis, coded using the Gioia Methodology and structured across the value creation, delivery, and capture framework, serve as the foundation for the conceptualisation of the "human-centred" business model. This model illustrates how the elements of the responsible tour operator's business model are developed around the well-being of individuals, not only in economic and socio-cultural terms, but also addressing the environmental dimensions of sustainability.

Building on the unified framework developed from the case studies analysis, a comparison is made with the business model of mass market tour operators in a dedicated section. This comparison not only highlights the key differences between the two models but also explores the potential for the "human-centred" business model developed to address a growing market, positioning it within the broader context of the dominant paradigm. As observed, the market increasingly demands more sustainable and authentic travel experiences, which mass tourism, in its current form, is unable to provide. In this context, there is a need to study the scalability of the "human-centred" business model to assess how it can be applied on a larger scale.

On the topic of scalability, elements are identified that suggest the potential for large-scale expansion of the responsible tourism model - being the flexibility of the business model and the growing heterogeneous market segment - and consequently, the possibility of a shift in the dominant paradigm. However, the research also highlights some limitations, raising the question of whether these are represented by the same factors that prevent full convergence between the business model of mass tour operators and that of responsible tourism.

Scalability can occur on multiple levels: the scalability of individual responsible tour operators, the scalability of the sector, understood as the expansion of the number of organisations operating according to the principles of responsible tourism, and scalability in terms of influencing the behaviour of mass tourism organisations. However, it is essential to consider that this is a “human-centred” business model, thus focused on the individual. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the limitations imposed by the very human dimension, which is at the heart of the business model.

The study of the scalability of the unified framework developed in this research, requiring further investigation, can, in fact, serve as a starting point for future research. It is therefore suggested that future studies could further explore the scalability of responsible tour operators’ business models, in order to better understand how to facilitate and promote a paradigm shift in the sector. Additionally, the author, based on a preliminary analysis of the organisation Evaneos, suggests that this platform could represent an interesting case study for exploring the scalability of responsible tourism. Indeed, Evaneos adopts an innovative operating model, highly digitalised, that connects end consumers with local agencies, with the goal of promoting a shift in the mass tourism paradigm, while following the principles of responsible and sustainable tourism.

This academic research concludes acknowledging that change must occur on multiple levels: demand, supply, and regulation, both at the national and international levels. However, by drawing a parallel with their fundamental role in the exponential development of the mass tourism paradigm, responsible tour operators are considered

undoubtedly a strong starting point for facilitating this paradigm transformation and guiding the industry toward a more sustainable future.

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Appendices

Note 1: *The following protocols outline the guiding questions used in the semi-structured interviews with the two informants. The interviewer used the protocol as a flexible framework rather than a fixed script. Additional follow-up questions were integrated to explore emerging topics in more depth, depending on the direction of the conversation.*

Note 2: *The full interview transcripts are not included in the appendices due to space constraints but can be shared upon request.*

Appendix A. Interview Protocol, Associazione Italiana Turismo Responsabile (AITR)

Interview with Maurizio Davolio, President of AITR– 1 Hour

1. Are the basic **structures of the business models** of traditional tour operators and responsible tour operators similar or do they differ fundamentally?
 - a. In the context of responsible tourism, what are the main differences between integrating sustainable practices into a traditional business model and a business model that is entirely based on responsible tourism principles?
 - b. Do large traditional tour operators that integrate sustainability into their operations represent competition for tour operators committed to responsible tourism?
2. Is there a dominant business model among responsible tour operators, or do models tend to be unique, depending on factors such as geographical context or target market?
3. Who do responsible tour operators create value for? Is the **target market** of responsible tour operators mostly different from that of traditional tour operators, or is there some overlap?

4. What is the **value proposition** of responsible tour operators? What kind of value do they offer that traditional tour operators do not?
5. What are the **key activities** that responsible tour operators carry out in order to deliver their value proposition?
 - a. Considering the following five areas: internal management, product development, supply chain management, customer relationship, destination cooperation, which ones play a central role in the business model of responsible tour operators?
6. How is the process of developing a **sustainable travel product** structured?
 - a. How does AITR support partner tour operators in implementing these processes?
7. In terms of **supply chain management**, what processes do responsible tour operators follow to select service suppliers for the different components of the travel package?
 - a. To what extent do tour operators maintain control over the components of the travel package?
8. Who are the main **stakeholders** involved in the value creation of responsible tour operators? With which of them are the strongest synergies developed?
9. How do responsible tour operators manage the **inclusion of local communities** in the supply chain while ensuring compliance with required quality standards, such as those defined by the EU Package Travel Directive (2015/2302)?
10. **Marketing activities**: How do responsible tour operators communicate their values and the distinctive aspects of their offerings to potential customers? What are the most commonly used channels to promote and market their products?
11. What **pricing strategies** do responsible tour operators adopt?
 - a. What strategies are used to communicate the added value of responsible travel experiences, especially when the price is higher than mass tourism alternatives?
12. How do responsible tour operators balance the need to **generate profit** with broader goals such as inclusive growth and positive social impact?

13. What are the main **challenges** that responsible tour operators face in developing sustainable tourism offerings? What are the biggest obstacles to growth in today's tourism market?
14. **Scalability:** Do you believe that the business model of responsible tour operators can be scaled?
 - a. Could growth and expansion to a wider market cause responsible tour operators to move away from their original value proposition and risk losing the core values of responsible tourism?

Appendix B. Interview Protocol, Viaggi Solidali

Interview with Enrico Marletto, President and Founder of Viaggi Solidali – 57 minutes

1. **Value proposition:** What are the main and distinctive elements that motivate travellers to choose your offering? (For example, unique experiences, local encounters, slower travel pace, presence of local guides, group travel offering).
2. Is your **customer segment** inherently different from that of conventional tour operators? Is there an intentional targeting of specific market segments?
3. **Does the creation of new offerings** stem from the availability of supply (e.g., existing development projects), or are they driven by consumer demand for a specific destination or type of experience/itinerary?
 - a. Is there ongoing development and design of new travel products and itineraries?
4. What are the core internal **activities and capabilities** that are essential to delivering your value proposition?

5. With regards to international destinations, do you rely on local inbound tour operators, or do you have direct relationships with **local suppliers** through the in-country coordinators?
6. Can you elaborate on the roles, functions, and relationships among programming managers (whether staff or collaborators), local partners, and tour leaders?
7. Within your group travel proposals, is **community-based tourism** always included, or only in specific contexts? Do these trips have different costs compared to your knowledge-based tourism trips?
8. **Marketing activities:** within your promotion activities, do you make use of marketing campaigns to reach new potential customers?
 - a. Can you elaborate on the aspect of selling directly to the customer?
9. What are the **economic and contractual conditions** governing the relationship between the tour operator and service providers?
10. Can you explain the operational function of **no-binding pre-registration**?
11. What are your main **sources of revenue**? Does the organisation's revenue come exclusively from a fee (fixed or variable?) included in the travel participation fee?
12. What are the main **fixed and variable costs** in your business? (e.g., salaries, marketing activities, management costs of the development fund, etc.)
13. What are the main **management and operational challenges** of your activity? For example, does coordinating and monitoring a large number of small local contacts across more than 40 destinations pose particular challenges?
14. **Level of innovation:** Has your business model changed over time? What factors have triggered those changes?
15. **Scalability:** Do you believe your business model could be scaled to reach a larger market? Based on your growth experience, could the expansion undermine the effective implementation of the core principles of responsible tourism?