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# Conceptualising Destination Membership Cards for Elite Travellers

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**Abstract:** This study explores two different destination membership card models with the aim of developing a comprehensive framework for understanding this aspect of elite travel. Through a comparative analysis of the different types of destination membership cards, we develop a model that situates tourism knowledge and suggests areas of further research in this under-explored area. Two important destination membership card models are identified: state supported and private sector based. The state-supported agent offers privileged membership, consolidates resources, and creates exclusive experiences. Conversely, the private-sector-based agent tends to amass the resources offered by destination businesses to create exclusive services and provide special access to resources. Both types are significant agents that channel and empower travellers in the high-end segment, thereby creating further differentiation in products and services in the context of market segmentation.

**Keywords:** Destination image, destination marketing, loyalty reward programmes, luxury travel, tourism.

**Zusammenfassung:** Der vorliegende Artikel widmet sich dem bisher wenig betrachteten Bereich von „Destination Membership Cards“ im Segment der Luxusreisenden. Den Kern des Beitrages stellt eine vergleichende Analyse der beiden zentralen Betreibermodelle derartiger Angebote, nämlich den staatlich geförderten beziehungsweise den privatwirtschaftlich organisierten Mitgliedsangeboten, dar. Stark verkürzt, lassen sich für staatlich unterstützte Initiativen die Ziele einer privilegierten Mitgliedschaft, der Konsolidierung von Ressourcen und die Schaffung exklusiver Erlebnisse konstatieren. Umgekehrt tendieren Initiativen im privaten Sektor dazu, die von den Zielunternehmen angebotenen

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Ressourcen anzuhäufen, um exklusive Dienste und einen besonderen Zugang zu Ressourcen zu schaffen. Beide Ansätze stellen interessante Instrumente dar, das Segment der High-End-Reisenden zu stärken und zukünftig stärker zu beeinflussen. Darüber hinaus führen sie zu einer zunehmenden Differenzierung von Produkten und Dienstleistungen und damit zu einer stärkeren Marktsegmentierung.

## 1 Introduction

Although 2020 was a devastating year due to the global COVID-19 crisis, in the past decade, international tourism has been a growing industry, with profits increasing from US \$980 billion in 2010 to US \$1,482 billion in 2019. In the last 10 years, Europe has remained the first choice of destination for travellers, while Asia and the Pacific have remained in second place. Throughout this decade, Asia and the Pacific have seen an increasing percentage of air travel – from 57% in 2010 to 65% in 2018 – and every year, more than 75% percent of international travellers have the same region as their final destination. Among France, Spain, and the United States, Thailand is included in the top 10 countries of the world in terms of international tourism receipts, which saw a rise from US \$23.79 billion in 2010 to US \$65.24 billion in 2018. In the Middle East region, the United Arab Emirates has been the front-runner in international tourism receipts for years, with total amounts ranging from US \$8.57 billion in 2010 to US \$21.39 billion in 2018 (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2020). There will certainly be a pent-up desire for travel in the post-COVID-19 world (Shadel 2020; Swart 2020). The global luxury travel industry is expected to reach profits of US \$2.5 trillion dollars, and even with adjustments for the post-COVID-19 era, the amount is unlikely to reduce substantially, given elite travellers' ability to afford social distancing requirements (Globetrender 2020). Thus, as such, travel destinations for the tourism industry are unquestionably important.

Similar to other distributions of wealth and expenditures in society, elite travel, comprising the top few percent of total tourism expenditures, still makes up a substantial share of the industry (Chen & Peng 2014). Elite travellers seek the *nec plus ultra* of services to fulfil their interests in hedonic and eudemonic well-being experiences (Iloranta 2019). Elite travellers are not only interested in extravagant and luxurious products, such as complimentary high-end fashion slippers in the first-class cabins of airlines and the magnum-sized Grand Crus wines of acclaimed chateaus in France, but they are even more invested in pursuing intangible, tailor-made and intimate experiences or treatments that make them feel exclusive and, perhaps most importantly, reinforce the value of idleness

as opposed to business (Shin & Back 2020). Due to rapidly growing economic and population numbers, an increasing number of elite travellers are from Asia, and their target destinations are more often than not in the Asian region as well (Bao et al. 2019). For these reasons, this study focuses on elite travel, particularly in the Asian setting.

Stakeholders at destinations (e.g., hotel chains or restaurants) create experiences for tourists (e.g., fine-dining or personalised transportation), often in concert with the market generating agents (Buhalis 2000). Studying the market strategies of destination membership cards can thus provide ideas for destination stakeholders, particularly policy makers and destination marketing organisations (DMOs), to apply in consolidating and creating experiences from the available national tourism resources. To examine these ideas, the existing practices and models are synthesised here to develop a cogent framework for strategic luxury market servicing in the context of destination membership cards.

Destination membership cards play an important role in facilitating and providing convenience to travellers. This is especially so when perfection and seamless services (i.e., uninterrupted services such as the elimination of waiting times in moving from one service to the other) are generally expected by elite travellers. In recent years, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) has advocated (1) security and travel facilitation, (2) crisis preparedness and response, and (3) sustainable growth of the travel industry. It is under the first pronouncement that the WTTC has advised the industry to be cognizant of creating a seamless experience for travellers from the moment they arrive at the airport and face immigration procedures (e.g., speedy customs clearance and tailored baggage delivery) to the experiences that they have at the destination (Mastny 2001; World Travel and Tourism Council 2020). Seamless travel with quality service that is undisrupted by border crossing issues is the type of experience that elite travellers wish to have (Chacko et al. 2012). In this regard, the use of membership cards can be a useful tool not only for the destination to extend its reach to a market segment but also for elite travellers, as the status and privileges that come with the card define the quality of the experiences offered at a particular destination (Atkinson 2016). Elite membership allows a destination to establish its brand affinity with elite travellers, and it is largely dependent on this particular travelling class.

Destination membership cards as a marketing tool (Zoltan & McKercher 2015) and tourist experience (Basili et al. 2014) can lead to a form of sophistication of the kind offered by gold or platinum credit cards that avail customers of exclusive privileges. Destination membership itself draws on loyalty in return for certain privileges exclusive to the subscriber. The convenience and accessibility of certain benefits greatly determine the success or failure of destination membership cards (Zopiatis et al. 2016). Many destinations, from Jamaica in the west (e.g., Barclay-

card, Arrival Plus and World Elite Mastercard; see Credit Card Insider 2020) to Singapore in the east (e.g., the Singapore Unlimited Attractions Pass; see iVenture Card 2020) have implemented destination membership cards to provide discounted and privileged accessibility to tourists' services and products.

While we have observed the rife use of destination membership cards in various marketing disciplines, studies in the tourism literature on their use have only been emerging in recent years (e.g., Angeloni 2016; Schnitzer et al. 2018; Shi et al. 2014; Zoltan & McKercher 2015). Furthermore, destination membership cards tailored to the elite traveller are not often found and have been considered much less often by the scholarly community. The potential for policy makers and industry practitioners to explore the expanded use of destination membership cards is an impetus for intellectual inquiry. Hence, the contribution of this study consists in mapping out what destination membership cards are, especially in the context of elite travel. To achieve this research objective, we approached the topic by engaging in the following tasks:

1. Review of existing literature on destination membership cards and inter-related topics to understand the marketing and consolidation of national resources.
2. Construction of a framework with insightful strategies for using destination membership cards that link segmented markets to targeted resources as part of an overall marketing approach (Angeloni 2016; Zoltan & McKercher 2015).

This study explores the context and content value of two different types of destination membership cards to develop a framework that illuminates how such cards, when deployed in a strategic way, can benefit both elite travellers and the destination.

## 2 Approach

In conducting the literature review on contemporary studies related to travel cards and their relationship to destination marketing and experience, this paper addresses the following research questions (RQs):

- *RQ1: What types of relationships does a destination membership card have with prospective visitors?*
- *RQ2: How do state-supported and private-sector-based membership cards differ in their offerings?*
- *RQ3: In what ways can destinations enhance their attractiveness using membership cards in the elite segment?*

Acknowledging that there are many types and levels of accessibility with respect to destination membership cards, several are highlighted as examples. Two primary destination membership cards are highlighted to elicit clear differences between “partly private or public organisations” (i. e., state supported) and “fully private organisations” (i. e., private sector based). In this regard, the Thailand Elite card from Thailand and the Privilee card from the United Arab Emirates are considered as examples. The Thailand Elite card was selected because it contains the characteristics of a state-supported endeavour. Furthermore, the Thailand Elite membership offers access to a broad base of national-level privileges that are rarely offered by other destinations. However, the Thailand Privilege Card Company is a private holding, and its history began under the initiative of the previous Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, with the company later being incorporated under the Civil and Commercial Code in 2003, with the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) having oversight. While enticing long-term staying visitors such as retirees has been the result of such endeavours, the Thailand Elite card is primarily aimed at attracting high net worth individuals and families to experience Thailand with an exclusive set of services and privileges offered upon arrival and extending for five years or more (Scuzzarello 2020). The Thailand Privilege Card Company’s working partners include Thailand’s Consular Services, the Immigration Bureau and the Ministry of Tourism and Sports.

Privilee membership provides a basis for a comparative analysis given that it is solely a private venture. A former pilot had frequently stopped in Dubai and found that there was something missing in the region for people who wanted exclusive leisure time. In 2015, he started the Privilee card that gave access to leisure, entertainment, and well-being facilities and services at discounted rates. Operating independent of government assistance and continuously sought after by suppliers, the private enterprise of the Privilee card has made its mark as a destination and domestic privileged membership card useful to those long-term and frequent visitors who wish to enjoy the high-end lifestyle.

In the next section, the relevant literature is reviewed, but we begin by defining the “elite traveller”. Subsequently, the types and characteristics of destination membership cards are discussed, followed by a subsection that brings together the concepts of destination membership cards and elite travel. The following section proposes the conceptual framework for resource consolidation and market stimulation strategies based on the two exemplary destination cards (i. e., the Thailand Elite card and the Privilee card). The paper ends with concluding remarks on the research limitations, future research areas, and practical implications.

## 3 Literature review

### 3.1 Defining the “elite traveller”

Who is the elite traveller? In the Introduction section, we briefly highlighted some of the core characteristics of these few happy, hedonism-seeking luxury travellers. In this section, we rely on socio-demographic, psychographic and behavioural notions of people in general, and travellers in particular, to arrive at our own understanding of the elite traveller.

How people behave and eventually make decisions, such as those regarding travel, can be defined by their social status and basic values. In looking at things this way, different socio-economic segments arise that may be of particular interest when considering businesses' commercial purposes (e.g., tailored marketing to specific segments). On the international level, it is generally known that people from the same segment are more like-minded than people from the same country but different segments. As a few prominent socio-economic segments, “traditionalists” and “consumer materialists” are those with relatively lower social status and basic values (e.g., lifestyles and consumer preferences). Traditionalists seek security, value modesty, and possess a “down-to-earth” mentality, while “consumer materialists” are materialistic and consumer hedonistic, but more often than not, they are also socially disadvantaged (SINUS Markt- und Sozialforschung GmbH 2020). In terms of travel, people from these socio-economic segments can be referred to as “modern materialists” (i.e., seeking to impress those at home with their sun tan, exhibiting a preference for superficial friendships and entertainment when travelling, and being inclined to dine out on fast food) and “traditional materialists” (i.e., exhibiting a preference for package tours, home-style food at low prices and special offers) (Dalen 1989). In other words, these travellers typically favour mass tourism.

On the other side of the spectrum, “intellectuals”, “performers” and the “cosmopolitan avant-garde” have high social statuses and high basic values. These people are generally open-minded, non-conformist and flexible; are mobile-socialisers; have post-material goals; and seek out freedom, self-realisation/-actualisation and independence (SINUS Markt- und Sozialforschung GmbH 2020). With regard to travelling, these people are close to the “modern and traditional idealists” in their search for atmosphere, untouched nature and culture, new destinations, individuality and exclusivity. These individuals are prepared to pay high prices to experience luxury (Dalen 1989), which are typical characteristics of elite travellers.

The definition of luxury is inconclusive and very much in the eye of the beholder, but more often than not, it is socially driven in meaning as opposed

to self-constructed (Correia et al. 2020). The “conventional” understanding of luxury tourism refers to the pursuit of superior facilities and amenities, including a “5 star and above standard of accommodation, chartered flight, private jet and yacht, butler and limousine service, and spectacular structures” (Sukmawati et al. 2018, p. 32). Most of these facilities and amenities are tangible. However, from the perspective of elite travellers, luxury is not always measured on tangible features. For example, according to the so-called “super elites”, the facilities and amenities must be of high quality, with advanced technology and exorbitant costs, while the so-called “classic elites” view all of these tangible features not only economically, but also in a more authentic way (e.g., intangible, part of experience) in which the price is not calculated (Ernawati et al. 2017; Sukmawati et al. 2018).

All things considered, elite travellers experience luxury tourism not only through high-end tangible features (e.g., products, facilities and amenities), but also through intangible, hedonic and meaningful aspects and experiences (e.g., services; Iloranta 2019). Individuality, exclusivity, authenticity far away from mass tourism and premium prices are key factors of our understanding of the interests of elite travellers. In conclusion, this paper follows the definition of elite travellers as *those who seek tangible and intangible luxury, defined by a strong inclination to individuality, exclusivity and authenticity, all of which are offered at premium prices*. One way elite travellers can experience this perceived level of quality is by purchasing and using destination membership cards, which is discussed in detail in the next section.

### 3.2 Destination membership card types and their characteristics

In this section, the answer to *RQ1* is provided. After exploring the existing literature on destination membership cards, we arrive at a typology of destination membership cards and supplier relationships in the context of elite travel, but only after the main destination membership card types – among others – are discussed, as well as their functionality, offers and advantages from the customer and provider perspective.<sup>1</sup>

Different types of customer (or loyalty) cards exist (Moore & Sekhon 2005). These cards may also be referred to as brand loyalty cards. Such cards are typ-

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<sup>1</sup> The functionalities, offers and advantages from the customer and provider perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Certain characteristics may apply to multiple types of destination membership cards.

ically used with supermarket and retail chains, such as Sainsbury's, Marks and Spencer and Tesco (see Turner & Wilson 2006), but hotel chains also offer them (cf. Pesonen et al. 2019). Another type is the club (or membership) card, sometimes referred to as an association card. Examples of these cards are those associated with fitness clubs (Emor 2016) and labour unions (Schneider & Reich 2014). There are also destination cards (also known as guest or tourist cards), of which two sub-types can be distinguished: first, there are leisure and specific site or attraction cards (Schnitzer et al. 2018; Seidl & Schnitzer 2020). Typical examples of such cards are the leisure card Tyrol (Seidl & Schnitzer 2020), ski cards for access to slopes and cards associated with attractions and theme parks such as Disney World and Universal Studios. Second, there are city, region or country destination cards (Angeloni 2016; Leung 2020; Pechlaner & Abfalter 2005). Well-known examples of this type of card are the Ticino Ticket card in Switzerland (Zoltan & McKercher, 2015) and the Trentino Guest Card in Trento, Italy (Scuderi & Dalle Nogare 2018)

Regarding the different functionalities of these card types, the common denominator of all cards is loyalty: the consumers are provided with a sense of belonging, which is promoted with the purpose of having them continue to buy (as return customers). The sense of belonging *equates* the relationship between the card and the prospective customer c.q. visitor. This event has been described as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same-brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour” (Oliver 1997, p. 392). Nonetheless, fine-grained differences between the functionality of the cards do exist. For example, customer (or loyalty) cards are mainly introduced for customers to accumulate points and collect rewards, or in other words, they have a bonus function (Moore & Sekhon 2005; Turner & Wilson 2006). Conversely, club (or membership) cards are less focussed on accumulating points and collecting rewards; rather, they have a payment function: dues are paid on a periodical basis and certain benefits, often in kind, are returned (e.g., unlimited use of services in fitness clubs). Moreover, destination cards have a clear access function: cards are purchased to provide access to sites, attractions or places (Angeloni 2016; Seidl & Schnitzer 2020). Finally, it is worth noting that all of these cards have additional functions. For example, whereas club (or membership) cards often target special interests or specific markets (e.g., sport fanatics or labourers), customer (or loyalty) cards tend to attract general consumers (e.g., supermarket customers) to perform targeted marketing on particular segments within the mainstream (e.g., age clusters or education categories). Some destination cards are based on a prepaid value with discounts being provided at various local attractions (e.g., ski cards or the



Trentino Guest Card), while others send post-travel reminders to access souvenir purchase options through dedicated websites (e. g., attraction cards and those for theme parks). A number of studies on destination membership cards have also focussed on the use of technology, cooperative benefits, merchant and destination promotion and guest loyalty to predict tourist behaviour (Pesonen et al. 2019; Schnitzer et al. 2018; Scuderi & Dalle Nogare 2018). For example, a destination membership card in Matera, Italy, is an electronically integrated pass that allows tourists to combine a number of services, and at the click of a button, they can prepay based on aggregated costs (Angeloni 2016).

From the customers' perspective, the offers and advantages are more often than not discounts and rewards (e. g., customer or loyalty cards; Turner & Wilson 2006); personalisation; exclusivity; prestige (e. g., club or membership cards; Liebermann 1999); and the provision of information, access and satisfaction (e. g., destination cards; Zoltan & McKercher, 2015). From the providers' perspective, the offers and advantages emerge from a legion of direct and indirect marketing objectives (Buhalis 2000; Kivetz & Simonson 2002; Moore & Sekhon 2005; Reitsamer et al. 2016) designed to boost sales, such as customer relationship management, market diversification and segmentation, membership subscription, product development and cooperation with potential partners.

### **3.2 Bringing the two together: Destination membership card types and elite travel**

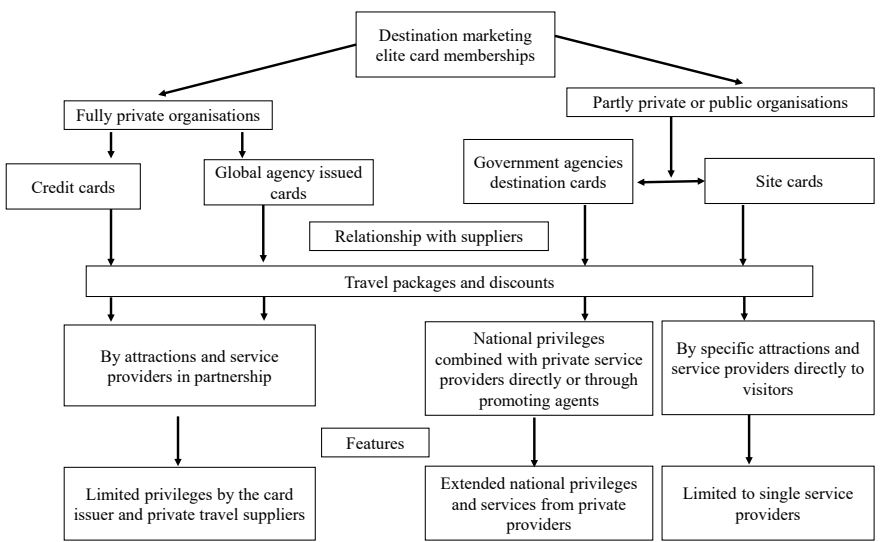
One of the first official membership cards was “AAdvantage”, introduced by American Airlines in 1981 (Xiong et al. 2014), with many others in different sectors to follow, including well-known examples of credit cards such as American Express and VISA. These were the first membership cards targeted to a specific segment: those who could afford frequent travel. In those days, this segment was designed for the elite traveller. Today, this particular traveller can be found in the luxury segment of the broader travel category, purchasing the premium-priced, high-end products and services of first-class air travel (e. g., Emirates First Class suites; Emirates 2020) and luxury accommodations (e. g., Shangri-La Hotel and Resorts; Shangri-La 2020; Chua et al. 2017; Hwang & Hyun 2017; Kivetz & Simonson 2002).

In the past few decades, membership has become an international phenomenon of thousands of programmes with millions of members. In the elite traveller settings, these members are affiliated with the world's best airlines, luxury hotels, high-end restaurants and other exclusive tourist attractions. Members can purchase products and experiences at different costs through various levels of participation, usually starting with a certain entry level up to advanced or

premium memberships. Members can be merely users as well as givers, supporters or advocates of programmes. Destinations can be marketed to (re)vitalize their international attractiveness by highlighting unique offerings. These marketing campaigns are initiated by “fully private organisations” and “partly private or public organisations”. In the next section, a conceptual framework is proposed based on these two types of organisations or organisational cooperation.

#### 4 Typology of destination membership cards and supplier relationships in the context of elite travel

The units of analysis can be identified from both the corporation’s perspective (i. e., the providers of such cards) and the customer’s (i. e., the individuals purchasing the cards). Based on the reviewed literature, we propose a conceptual framework of various destination membership cards and supplier relationships that accounts for both the corporate and customer perspectives (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework of various destination membership cards and supplier relationships.

This figure is organised as follows: starting with the highest order and common denominator, “destination marketing elite card memberships” are divided into the organisations that provide them, including “fully private organisations” (e.g., Privilee card) and “partly private or public organisations” (e.g., Thailand Elite Card). Subsequently, “fully private organisations” may provide “credit cards” (e.g., American Express’ Centurion card; Credit Card Insider 2018) and “global agency issued cards” (e.g., Club Elite Travel card membership; Club Elite Travel 2020). Conversely, “partly private or public organisations” can provide “government agencies destination cards” (e.g., Thailand Elite card) and “site cards” (e.g., Sands Rewards Lifestyle card; Marina Bay Sands 2020). Another type of destination membership card is one that is organised by a profession or community of members with common interests. Examples of these types of cards are ASmallWorld (ASmallWorld 2020) and FoundersCard (FoundersCard 2019). All these types of cards involve a relationship with suppliers, offering travel packages and special discounts to customers. These cards, however, are not destination specific; rather, they are a form of service provided to members to facilitate special events or gatherings at entertainment outlets to meet and socialise with local elites.

On the side of “fully private organisations”, relationships with suppliers could be established through attractions and service providers in partnerships (e.g., Sands Rewards Lifestyle Card; Marina Bay Sands 2020), subsequently leading to limited privileges provided by card issuers and private travel suppliers. For “partly private or public organisations”, relationships with suppliers may be “national privileges combined with private service providers directly or through promoting agents” (e.g., Thailand Elite card) or “by specific attractions and service providers directly to visitors” (e.g., British Airways’ Blue Membership in Executive Club; British Airways 2020). Finally, the “national privileges combined with private service providers directly or through promoting agents” include “extended national privileges and services from private providers” (e.g., Thailand Elite card) and “by specific attractions and service providers directly to visitors” are limited to single service providers (e.g., two hotels located in Krabi, Thailand, offer the Prestige Card; The Prestige Card 2020).

#### **4.1 Showcasing destination membership cards: Thailand Elite and Privilee**

In this section, we address *RQ2*. In the typology depicted in Figure 1, we focus on the right-sided pathway of partly private or public organisations. The reason for this focus is fourfold: first, this pathway displays the origins of ownership (i.e., partly private or public organisations). Second, this pathway most prominently

involves the cards specific to a destination that also promotes itself as a site of luxury. Third, as a marketing tool, the cards of this pathway weave into the larger destination marketing narrative offering premium services and the elite treatment of cardholders (e.g., Thailand Elite card). Finally, having showcased the many types of destination membership cards, we highlight cards that are from fully private organisations as well as those from partly private or public organisations to point out the limitations of each. We illustrate this pathway with two notable examples: Thailand Elite (“The best made better”; Thailand Elite 2020) and Privilee (“Luxury, comfort, self-indulgence at privilege: it’s all about you”; Dubai Privilee 2020), founded in 2003 and 2015, respectively. Both organisations provide different packages of benefits, privileges and periods of membership, all at different costs. For example, Thailand Elite offers the following, among other features:

- Free access to spas;
- Free medical check-ups;
- Private arrival and departure services;
- Transfers to and from the airport by limousine;
- Visa waiver, allowing the foreign elite member to stay within the country for one year (extendable up to five years).

The Thailand Elite card is promoted in, among other locations, India, Indonesia and Canada. For example, Apollo Voyages is the appointed Indian travel agent for the sale and promotion of the Thailand Elite card in India (Thailand Elite 2020). Marketing and sales in the tourist-generating country have a two-fold purpose. First, the established presence in the source country is designed to directly target high net worth individuals. Second, the service is provided to encourage repeat guests to Thailand. With a strong link to the government, the Thailand Elite card is most certainly empowered to distinguish itself from many other destination membership cards by leveraging its accessibility to agencies associated with property development and investment, business-to-business platforms and networking opportunities, immigration residency permits and access to easy credit through several banking facilities. Thailand is a destination well-known for its beautiful beach resorts, warm hospitality culture and varied attractions. With an excellent range of accommodation options, Thailand has no shortage of five-star hotels in its major cities and resort destinations. The standards of cleanliness and service are expectedly of high quality. Thus, the Thailand Elite card attests to Thailand’s aspiration to grow the luxury market segment in a determined way with support from the highest level of government institutions.

Conversely, the Privilee card, founded by the former pilot, is a privately owned card that promotes the advantages of the high-end lifestyle to a worldwide

elite audience. Seeing that only a few privileged pilots appear to enjoy exclusive access to the holiday riches, the Privilee card was launched in 2015 in the United Arab Emirates with a primary focus on Dubai. In comparison to the Thailand Elite card, the Privilee card offers the following features, among others (Dubai Privilee 2020):

- Complimentary valet parking;
- Within the United Arab Emirates, free access to numerous beaches, beach clubs, gyms, hotels, kids' clubs, pools and tennis courts;
- Free access to the assistance of a nanny.

Originating from the private sector, the characteristics and benefits of the Privilee card do not fully extend to immigration benefits or government-approved discounts to new property developments. While the Privilee card pushes forward to extend their membership reach through digital technology, there is a heavy reliance on participation and close working relationships with suppliers. With modern technology, the Privilee card has also devised a mechanism for members via mobile app messaging that provides timely alerts on available resources at a hefty discount. For example, if the spa services of a five-star hotel are in low season, the Privilee card sends such information with a special rate on a timely basis to make their members aware of the discount and entice them to the attraction (Hotelier Middle East 2019).

Apart from a number of differences in their services, the main distinction between the Thailand Elite and Privilee cards is that the former is government supported, while the latter organisation is privately owned. The Privilee card is more of a discount card with a here-and-now approach. Conversely, the Thailand Elite card offers a scale of pseudo-resident benefits (South China Morning Post 2019a, 2019b; Thailand Elite 2020). The Privilee card is not integrated with the public sector agencies; therefore, much of the privileges are dependent on the owners' ability to develop partnerships with the wider affinity businesses to provide the type of eudemonic services that elite travellers desire. Hence, from the perspective of ownership, the Thailand Elite destination membership card goes the furthest in facilitating travel privileges from the moment a high-end guest lands at the airport to their stay at the hotel through immigration services, limousine rides and access to the first release of newly built properties, all of which seem to treat the elite traveller as a potential long-term stayer with VIP status.

## 5 Concluding remarks

### 5.1 Research limitations

As with all research, this study does not stand without its limitations. For reasons pointed out in the Introduction, this study focuses primarily on elite travellers and two destination membership cards that are well-known and available to a wider audience. Accordingly, the right-sided pathway of partly private or public organisations in Figure 1 is exemplified based on our understanding. We acknowledge the existence of all kinds of travellers as well as variations in destination membership cards. Moreover, we assume that – only for the super-rich elite traveller – exclusive clubs or communities exist that may be unknown to the regular (travel) world. In such clubs or communities, services offered in line with well-known destination membership cards may take different shapes and could reach the next level of exclusiveness. Although obtaining access to information about such clubs and communities may be difficult, they are not less interesting for this reason. Thus, we encourage future research to explore different paths – within or beyond Figure 1 – that could illuminate how destination membership cards apply to elite travellers. Furthermore, the descriptive nature of this study lacks empirical support. Hence, Figure 1, together with our outlook on future research – discussed next – should be interpreted with caution.

### 5.2 Future research areas

This paper proposes a conceptual framework (i.e., Figure 1) illustrating how destination membership cards are an essential part of destination marketing for elite travellers, whether to entice them into travelling or to create a seamless experience at a particular destination (Angeloni 2016; Pesonen et al. 2019). Given the mechanisms through which different destination membership cards originate and operate, with a primary focus on the benefits and exclusivity of members, this portends several fertile research areas:

1. First, from a socio-economic perspective, one path for future research could be to explore the socio-economic impact of the membership cards issued by government or public agencies compared to those provided by the private sector. Aspects of customers' conversion and retention rates, lifetime value, purchasing behaviour, user experience and switching costs could be investigated (Scuderi & Dalle Nogare 2018).

2. Second, from a psychological perspective, another future research avenue could be to determine the sentiments of the destination card members (using the sentiment analysis method; Anitsal et al. 2019). In this research area, socio-demographic aspects (e.g., age, education, gender, household composition, income, marital status, professional occupation and religion) may play an important role in exploring the drivers of prospective customers.
3. The third direction for future research, from a marketing perspective, is to seek an understanding of the marketing of the destination and its efficacy using the membership cards in the post- and pre-travel periods. Here, factors such as customer relationship building, product and service positioning and market segmentation could be significant investigation points to inform policy makers and industry professionals of the presentation, form and sustainable value creation (Schnitzer et al. 2018). Because the destination membership card can involve multiple stakeholder interests, it would be valuable to take a multi-management stakeholder approach to understand the complexities of the products and service offerings while at the same time leading to developing innovative frameworks of cooperation benefiting suppliers and consumers (Schnitzer et al. 2018; Waligo et al. 2013).

The above-listed routes for future research are not exhaustive. We encourage others to use our proposed framework as a point of departure for shaping and filling up the landscape of research on the destination membership cards of elite travellers not only theoretically, but also for other methodological approaches (e.g., switching from qualitative to mixed and quantitative methods). The next step could be to illustrate methods of – especially – qualitative and quantitative data collection to test the pathways of Figure 1, (re)consider certain propositions and, eventually, formally test new hypotheses (Edmondson & McManus 2007).

### 5.3 Practical implications

In a more practical sense, and addressing *RQ3*, research that builds upon the proposed framework could bring forth several marketing-related implications for practice. These implications could lead to the establishment of better product-market fit and, consequently, to a greater economic volume of the tourism industry.

From the customer's perspective, partly private or public organisations may or may not be more attractive to a specific group (e.g., based on age or nationality) of customers. For example, middle-aged customers may be given the knowledge that more services and products of Privilee are attractive to them compared to

those of Privilee's competitors (viz. attractive to other customer groups such as the elderly). In so doing, the functionalities of different types of cards could merge, for example, the sense of belonging of a club (or membership) card for particular segments (cf. sport fanatics associated with fitness clubs) with the provision of information about a particular destination (cf. visitors of specific destinations, such as the previously mentioned cities of Ticino and Trento). Section 3.2 elaborates on the different types of cards, their functionalities and some practical examples.

From the corporate perspective, partly private or public organisations could tailor their marketing campaigns based on supplier relationships and the travel packages offered. For example, the Thailand Elite card could contract different/ other suppliers (e.g., other accommodations or other organisations providing local transportation) based on consumer preferences. By doing so, the typical functionalities of other types of cards could be adopted and brought together, *in casu* the targeted marketing campaigns on particular segments based on data retrieved from customer (or loyalty) cards and personalisation and exclusiveness, which is prototypical for club (or membership) cards. See Section 3.2 for an elaboration on the different types of cards, their functionalities and real-world examples.

How can elite membership cards that are segmented and targeted be efficient in marketing a destination? Destination membership cards can be used as a tool to draw travellers. When a card is packed with a concentrated number of services, products and benefits (cf. the destination membership card in Matera, Italy; Angeloni 2016), the attraction to the destination – let alone the subscription to the card – can be powerful. This can be a way for destinations to entice visitors. With the Thailand Elite card subscription, since its inception in September 2019, 8,602 members have received exclusive privileges and are enjoying some form of pseudo-residency (Worrachaddejchai 2019). Plans are already afoot to sell 24,600 cards worth over US \$475 million, with particular attention being paid to Oceania, the Indian subcontinent and the United Kingdom (*Ibid.*)

Conversely, the Privilee card is developing sophisticated time-based benefits and promotions when travellers are actually at the destination. The use of real-time information dissemination via SMS and e-mails can alert members about the availability of a fitness club for use due to the low number of users during a specific hour or that the cinema is providing a hefty discount because of the low number of patrons. In this way, the Privilee card not only provides privileges but also facilitates informed decisions for members.

Because destination membership cards do not have an intrinsic value through which they can be traded for a difference in monetary value, the ownership tends to rest with only the owner (i.e., it is not transferable from one owner to another). Future destination cards may consider creating value beyond a single



travel owner, such as golf club membership cards (see, for example, in Thailand: Golf Orient 2020) or social club membership cards (American Club in Singapore 2020). By creating trade-over cards with the full range of benefits, the destination could also be creating another stream of marketing for card owners who intend to exchange for profit because – based on demand and supply – the value of trade-over cards may increase. Transferable value cards by themselves could become a powerful marketing tool for destinations and the next disrupter in the travel business arc.

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