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Mitigating Overtourism with Social Media:
The Case Study of the Facebook Community
"Dolomites for Beginners"

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Introduction

       The purpose of this thesis is to address one of the most crucial issues affecting tourism destinations all over the world today: overtourism. In particular, the work aims at demonstrating how social media could potentially play a crucial role in mitigating overtourism. In order to demonstrate this, a specific area has been chosen as a case study, namely the Dolomites, located in the north-eastern part of Italy. In fact, the Dolomites have become one of the regions that are most affected by this issue due to the significant number of visitors they attract all year long, especially following their inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2009 (Bertocchi et al., 2021).

       In order to explain how social media could be leveraged to mitigate overtourism in this area, the case study of the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*, available at the QR Code provided below, is analysed.

       This thesis is organised in six different sections. Chapter 1 outlines the issue of overtourism in more general terms, in order to provide a theoretical framework, which functions as the basis for the analysis of the case study. After an overview of the methodology employed in this research contained in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 examines the case study of *Dolomites for Beginners* in all its facets. This chapter describes the steps that led to the establishment of this Facebook group, its creation, development and present evolution, employing data on its internal functioning, its members and more relevant posts.

After the analysis of the case study, the focus of the research broadens to include a competitive analysis of other Facebook groups that share similarities with *Dolomites for Beginners* in order to understand their best practices. The last two chapters of the thesis are closely related as they elaborate on the strategies that can be implemented in the Facebook group in the future in order to effectively transform it into a tool for the mitigation of overtourism in this area. More specifically, Chapter 5 examines the strategies that can be implemented in the Facebook group while remaining confined in the virtual realm of this social network, while Chapter 6 illustrates the strategies that would enable *Dolomites for Beginners* to create connections with stakeholders, businesses and communities located in the Dolomitic area. Particular emphasis is placed on the process through which the Facebook group can evolve into a brand that can potentially have a significant impact on local tourism (Esch, n.d.; 2014; 2019).

The decision to write this work of thesis on such topic stems from several motivations. The first reason is closely connected to my academic background. In fact, my intention is to further develop the work I initiated during the course *IT for Tourism Services* at the University of Bergamo, which was the reason for the creation of the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*. Moreover, the focus on branding in the final chapters of this work reflects the interest I developed in this area during my Erasmus experience at the University of Applied Sciences – Hochschule Stralsund in Germany. In this sense, my goal is to create a meaningful connection between the knowledge acquired at the University of Bergamo and at Hochschule Stralsund within the framework of my Double Degree program.

The second reason is rooted in my personal experience. Throughout my studies, I have developed a strong attachment to my home region, the Dolomites. In fact, the Dolomites were already the focus of my Bachelor's Degree thesis at the University of Trento. During my Master's studies, my interest in this territory has deepened, inspiring me to create a Facebook group dedicated to the Dolomites during one of the courses I attended, as already mentioned. This initiative ultimately motivated my decision to write my Master's thesis on this topic because I believe it offers a unique and personal perspective on a very important and widespread issue in tourism today (Koens et al., 2018).

1. Overtourism, Social Media and Online Communities

The first chapter of this thesis establishes the theoretical foundation that will be necessary when analysing the case study presented in later chapters. To achieve this goal, each key concept mentioned in the title of this work is further explored.

Section 1.1 focuses on the phenomenon of overtourism, providing some definitions along with an overview of its main characteristics, causes, consequences. A practical application of this phenomenon is provided by describing a real-life case study, namely the Dolomites UNESCO World Heritage site, which will become the focus of this work in a later stage.

Section 1.2 shifts the focus on the role of social media in tourism, trying to understand how social media permeate each stage of the journey undertaken by the tourist. Moreover, attention is given to how the different use of social media can lead to an increase or a mitigation of overtourism. Real-life case studies, both positive and negative, are employed to illustrate the complex and dynamic relationship between social media and overtourism.

Section 1.3 narrows down the focus of the thesis by providing an analysis of online communities in relation to tourism. It illustrates the different types of online communities in tourism, while also describing the phenomenon of User-Generated Content and the importance of the role of the administrators. Particular attention is given to the case of online communities in tourism, in particular to Facebook groups. Examples of popular tourism-related Facebook groups will be employed to better describe the widespread use of this tool in tourism.

1.1. Overtourism

This section provides an overview on the phenomenon of overtourism. After a brief description of its evolution during the last decades and of its main definitions from scholars and tourism organisations, its key concepts and frameworks are presented in order to provide a foundational background to this concept. The following two sections outline the main causes and consequences of this phenomenon. The third section applies the concept of overtourism to a specific case study, namely the Dolomites UNESCO World Heritage Site in the North of Italy.

1.1.1. Defining Overtourism

The phenomenon of "overtourism" can be traced back to the second half of the 20th century. As early as the 1960s, several authors had already started analysing the negative impacts of tourism on local communities and environments (Capocchi et al., 2019). The debate on overtourism continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as the growth in the purchasing power of consumers after the Second World War led to a sharp rise in tourist numbers across Europe (Smeral, 2019). As a result, tourism developed into a mass phenomenon, generating such significant negative impacts on several destinations that it became known as a "landscape eater" (Fontanari & Berger-Risthaus, 2019).

Although this phenomenon and its underlying issues have existed for decades, as underlined above, the term "overtourism" is said to have been coined only in 2016 by the travel and tourism platform Skift (UNWTO, 2018). However, it gained mainstream attention in academic and public discourse only in 2017, when scholars and organisations began actively defining and discussing about it (Innerhofer et al., 2019). Goodwin (2017, p.1) defines overtourism as a phenomenon that characterises "destinations where hosts or guests, locals or visitors, feel that there are too many visitors and that the quality of life in the area or the quality of the experience has deteriorated unacceptably". Goodwin further argues that overtourism represents the opposite of Responsible Tourism, namely a type of tourism that can lead to better places to live and visit (ibid.). A year later, Koens et al. (2018, p.2) described overtourism as an "an excessive negative impact of tourism on the host communities and/or natural environment". Similarly, Milano et al. (2019, p.4)

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defined it as "the excessive growth of visitors leading to overcrowding in areas where residents suffer the consequences of temporary and seasonal tourism peaks". Even the UNWTO contributed to the debate, describing 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" (2018, p.6). By 2018, the term overtourism had gained so much popularity that the Oxford Dictionary named it one of the words of the year (Fontanari, & Berger-Risthaus, 2019).

As these definitions illustrate, scholars have yet to establish a universally accepted definition of overtourism, even though they all emphasize the negative externalities of this phenomenon on both residents and tourists in specific destinations (Shukla & Shamurailatpam, 2021). In fact, Fontanari and Berger-Risthaus (2019) clarify that overtourism is not only about the physical destruction of the environment but also about the reduction in the quality of life of residents and in the quality of the experience lived by visitors. However, it should be underlined that overtourism is not solely a tourism-related problem. In fact, Koens et al. (2018) argue that the overuse of resources connected to overtourism is not only caused by the arrival of tourists but also by the increase in the number of residents, commuters and day visitors.

Scholars have also underlined the difference between overtourism and other tourism-related issues, such as mass tourism and overcrowding. On the one hand, Koens et al. (2018) underline that overtourism is not the same as mass tourism. In fact, overtourism focuses on environmental degradation and disruption to people's lives, rather than only on the large number of visitors in an area, as mass tourism does. In this sense, overtourism can be caused even by a very small increase in the number of tourists in a destination, or even in a specific part of it, as argued by Fontanari and Berger-Risthaus (2019). On the other, Capocchi et al. (2019) emphasise that overtourism and overcrowding are not interchangeable terms. Butler (ibid.) argues that, unlike overcrowding, which refers to the subjective perception of visitor density in a busy destination (Özgen Çiğdemli, 2021), overtourism occurs when the number of visitors overloads local services and facilities, becoming a burden on residents.

To clarify the difference between overtourism and overcrowding, building on Özgen Çiğdemli argument, one can refer to Bourliataux-Lajoinie's (2019) three

components of overtourism. The first component, namely infrastructure, relates to the overload of people in transit areas and challenges in managing access to services by a huge number of people, such as water and waste management. The second component, i.e., interaction between tourists and locals, highlights the struggles each group faces in accepting the customs and cultures of the other group. The last component, i.e., economic impact, considers both the benefits of tourism expenditure but also its impact on the costs of living of local people, such as increasing housing cost.

Another issue related to these components and to the definition of overtourism in general is the concept of *localhood*. This concept suggests that everyone is becoming a local in every destination, reframing overtourism as the relationship between long-term and short-term local people, underlining the difference among them only in terms of the duration of their stay in a particular destination (Volgger, 2019). Due to the aforementioned lack of a clear definition and structure to overtourism, Özgen Çiğdemli (2021) proposes to use other models to clarify its most important foundations.

1.1.2. Key Theoretical Approaches

This section will provide insights on the main concepts and models that can be exploited to clearly set the foundations of overtourism such as the *Carrying Capacity*, the *Tourist Area Life Cycle*, the *Irridex Model*, and the *Social Exchange Theory*.

Carrying Capacity

Fontanari & Berger-Risthaus (2019) explain that overtourism occurs in those areas where the carrying capacity limit has been exceeded. The carrying capacity of a destination was defined in 1981 by the UNWTO as "the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic, and sociocultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction" (Maggi, & Fredella, 2010, p.3).

O'Reilly (as cited by Yusoh et al., 2021) builds on this definition by distinguishing three dimensions of carrying capacity: physical, economic and sociocultural. The physical carrying capacity refers to the maximum number of people an area can contain without

causing environmental destruction or deterioration in visitors' experience. The economic carrying capacity relates to the ability of an area to sustain tourism functions without damaging local activities. The social dimension, which refers to the social and cultural impact caused by tourism on the local population, is considered the most difficult dimension to measure, because it depends on individual attitudes, opinions and preferences (ibid.). In this sense, it refers to the tolerance of the local community to the arrival of tourists, aligning with Özgen Çiğdemli's argument (2021) that residents have a certain tolerance limit towards the arrival of tourists.

Despite carrying capacity being such a widespread model to understand the negative consequences of tourism, many scholars have questioned its usefulness. This is related mostly to its focus on tourist numbers, leading to the incorrect belief that negative impacts arise only due to mass tourism and increasing visitor numbers, as already mentioned above (Koens et al., 2018). In this sense, Maggi and Fredella (2010) propose to use the Carrying Capacity as a strategic policy tool for sustainable tourism development rather than as a scientific measure. Yusoh et al. (2021) agree with this statement, affirming that Carrying Capacity is a very powerful concept that can be applied to sustainable tourism planning and management despite all the criticism.

Tourist Area Life Cycle

The Tourist Area Life Cycle (TALC), a model based on the product life cycle concept and the carrying capacity, was developed by Butler (Goodwin, 2017). The model divides the development of a tourist area into different phases, or stages, each one connected with specific behaviours and attitudes of the local community towards tourists and tourism as a whole (Özgen Çiğdemli, 2021). Butler (1980) introduces the model by presenting its first step, i.e., the *exploration stage*, where a small number of tourists are attracted to a destination fostering a direct contact with residents, which does not lead to major changes in the fabric of society. As tourism increases, the destination moves towards its second stage of development, namely the *involvement stage*.

This stage is characterised by the introduction of more facilities and services for visitors but the contact between tourists and local community remains high. Challenges start to arise in the next step, i.e., the *development stage*, when external organisations gain control over tourist facilities, reducing the local involvement in the tourism industry. The

next stage, i.e., the *consolidation stage*, causes discontent among permanent residents due to the huge number of tourists in their area, even though the rate of increase in tourist arrivals begins to decline. Lastly, the destination reaches the *stagnation stage*, where capacity limits are reached, resulting in social, economic and environmental issues. This last stage can result in two possible different scenarios: the *decline stage*, in which the destination is no longer appealing to visitors, or the *rejuvenation stage*, characterised by the creation of new man-made attractions or the exploitation of previously untapped natural resources to make the competitiveness of the destination last longer (ibid.).

Butler (2020) argues, however, that the relationship between the TALC model, explained above, and overtourism is not a simple one. He asserts that overtourism can occur at any stage of the TALC, rather than only in the later stages. This is strictly tied to the carrying capacity of the specific destination: if the carrying capacity is exceeded already at the early stages of the destination's life cycle, overtourism can occur even when the visitor's number is still relatively small. He suggests that this challenge can be partially solved by increasing the capacity of the destination through subsequent tourism developments (ibid.)

Irridex Model

Butler (1980) also underlines how each stage of the Tourist Area Life Cycle will provoke reactions in the local population, effectively connecting his model to the Irridex Model. The Irridex Model, or Irritation Index Model, was theorised by Doxey in 1975 and is one of the most fundamental frameworks to describe the negative sociocultural impacts of tourism (Apollo & Cheer, 2024). It is employed to understand the dynamics of the relationship between tourists and residents in a specific destination. The model illustrates how residents go through a predictable sequence of different attitudes as the negative effects of tourism intensify (ibid.) These attitudes progress from euphoria, when tourism emerges in a destination, to apathy, annoyance and eventually in antagonism, when the irritation is openly expressed due to the various issues caused by the increase in tourist numbers (Özgen Çiğdemli, 2021).

Social Exchange Theory

The social exchange theory is another model that can be used to understand the relation between tourists and local people (Özgen Çiğdemli, 2021). Abdool (2002) adds that the social exchange theory is the most useful and appropriate framework, despite being complex and dynamic, while he argues that the Irridex Model and the TALC have limited application. According to this theory, the local community will support tourism development if the perceived positive consequences derived from the social, cultural and economic relations with tourists are greater than the possible costs. Depending on this perception, the local community will support or be opposed to tourism.

1.1.3. Main Causes of Overtourism

The main causes of overtourism can be listed categorising them in different groups of factors.

Economic Factors

One of the factors causing overtourism is the drop in travel costs (Goodwin, 2019). Highly affordable tickets are now available thanks to the rise in the number of low-cost airlines (Bourliataux-Lajoinie et al., 2019) and increased competition among airlines in a liberalised sector (Gupta, 2024). However, Goodwin (2019) emphasises how transportation has increased in its scale not only in the aviation sector but also in the train and cruise industries, enabling more people to move across the world with different means of transportation.

Another factor is the emergence of low-cost tour package travel, which combines already cheap transportation, as mentioned above, with accommodation and activities, making travel even more accessible (Gupta, 2024). Moreover, travel has become affordable also due to a steady growth in income (Smeral, 2019) and a resulting overall greater prosperity. As a result, more people are able to travel worldwide (Dodds & Butler, 2019) due to this surplus of income available for each individual (Gupta, 2024).

Technological Factors

Dodds and Butler (2019) argue that the wider access to media and information in today's society has contributed to overtourism, as the amount of information available online influences travellers' decisions, effectively inspiring and helping people to travel. Additionally, social media play an important role in promoting destinations across the world, often leading to overcrowding in specific areas (ibid.). Goodwin (2019) also emphasises that internet access has allowed the rise of disintermediation in tourism, enabling the rise of P2P platforms, such as Airbnb, and online booking travel agencies (OTAs). These platforms and OTAs allow users to compare prices and find cheap accommodation more easily, leading to an increase in the number of tourists worldwide (Gupta, 2024).

Social and Demographic Factors

Gupta (2024) lists several social and demographic factors contributing to overtourism such as travelling becoming an essential activity for people. He identifies a change in consumer priorities, mostly in younger generations, who look for more meaningful experiences, while also emphasising an overall increasing focus on leisure activities among all generations (ibid.). Dodds & Butler (2019) explain how new segments of tourists, particularly in China, have emerged as a result of the drop in travel costs, listed above as an economic factor.

Political and Governance Factors

Dodds and Butler (2019) state that many countries view tourism as an opportunity to develop their economies in a more sustainable way compared to exploiting industries such as mining and manufacturing. This aligns with Gupta's (2024) argument that countries support tourism as a means to promote prosperity and employment in their own economies. However, many countries lack control over the destination and also regulations, which could effectively manage tourist arrivals in the long term.

Another governance issue is the fragmentation among tourism stakeholders: even when policies are introduced, they can be undermined by other levels of government due to the general lack of coordination and collaboration (ibid.). Goodwin (2019) further explains that policies to distribute tourists in larger areas can paradoxically worsen

overtourism, as tourists directly impact residents' lives in their own neighbourhoods. Another concern is represented by Destination Marketing Organisations: their efforts to attract tourists often lead to additional stress on already overcrowded areas that are easier to market and ensure quicker success (Goodwin, 2017).

Spatial and Infrastructural Factors

Smeral (2019, p.163) argues that overtourism is due to "pronounced regional and time concentration of tourism". Goodwin (2017) expands this stating that tourism is connected to seasonality in several areas, concentrating a large number of tourists in the same place at the same time. Although transportation has improved, as stated above, this concentration in tourists flow leads inevitably to other issues such as overload on infrastructure in places of transit, such as airports and stations, but also to problems in management of resources and facilities, such as drinking water supply and waste management (Bourliataux-Lajoinie et al., 2019).

1.1.4. Main Consequences of Overtourism

The main consequences of overtourism are divided by Iştin and Turpcu (2021) in three categories: economic, socio-cultural and environmental.

Economic Effects

Iştin and Turpcu (ibid.) underline how tourism can benefit a destination by providing employment and income while also fostering development. However, in the case of overtourism, negative effects arise such as the reduction in economic welfare, as stated by Shukla and Shamurailatpam (2021). Some examples are the higher prices of basic necessities but also increased living costs in the destination (Gupta, 2024). Gupta (ibid.) even argues that the increasing competition for access to resources might lead to shortages in the long term. Another issue is represented by the overloaded infrastructure, as already mentioned in the previous section.

Socio-Cultural Effects

Iştin and Turpcu (2021) argue that the socio-cultural effects are the most difficult to assert, as they relate to individual behaviours and experiences. These effects can be considered from the perspective of local residents and of tourists.

In a context damaged by overtourism, the local residents experience struggles in their daily life activities such as traffic congestion and crowding in public places. This leads to an overall unhappiness about their situation (ibid.). In fact, Gupta (2024) states that residents could feel marginalised in their own neighbourhoods due to tourists outnumbering them. Shukla and Shamurailatpam (2021) further explain that overtourism can lead to an increasing deterioration of socio-cultural values, traditions and customs of a destination due to the long staying of tourists.

In other words, prolonged overcrowding can threaten the culture and heritage of a destination (McKinsey & Company & World Travel & Tourism Council, 2017). Moreover, tourists too will be affected by this overall degradation in socio-cultural values. In fact, a deteriorated destination would offer them only a very poor tourist experience (ibid.), eventually leading to the loss of attractiveness of the whole destination (Shukla & Shamurailatpam, 2021)

Environmental Effects

Overtourism leads to environmental and ecological degradation (Shukla & Shamurailatpam, 2021). In fact, one effect of overtourism is the destruction of nature, biodiversity and natural resources. For example, sustaining tourism requires the construction of a multitude of facilities, leading to exploitation of materials, land and resources while endangering fauna and flora species (Iştin & Turpcu, 2021). Tourism is also responsible for air, water, soil and noise pollution, large generation of waste and even for greater worldwide issues such as rising temperatures, climate change and global warming (Gupta, 2024).

1.1.5. Overtourism in the Dolomites

After providing an overview of the general phenomenon of overtourism, this paragraph will narrow the focus of the thesis by applying the concept of overtourism to the analysis of a specific area, i.e., the Dolomites.

The Dolomites are a mountain group in the Eastern Italian Alps in the North of Italy. In 2009 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) inscribed 9 different parts, or systems, of this mountain range in the World Heritage List due to the beauty of its landscape and the scientific importance of its geology and geomorphology (Bertocchi et al., 2021). Scuttari et al. (2019) emphasise how this site is extremely complex as it extends over three regions (Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia), five different provinces (i.e., Belluno, Bolzano, Trento, Udine, Pordenone) and 137 municipalities, as it can be seen in Figure 1.

According to Scuttari et al. (2019), the primary aim of the inscription in the World Heritage List is the long-term conservation of nature and biodiversity. To achieve this aim, it is essential to raise awareness among the greater public and tourism can play a key role in this process. However, they also underline that tourism can also be damaging, as UNESCO World Heritage sites are subject to the socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts caused by it. In particular, an increase in visitor numbers inevitably leads to several issues such as traffic, congestion, noise and pollution, which can lead to damaging natural resources, while diminishing residents' quality of life and tourists' quality of experience.
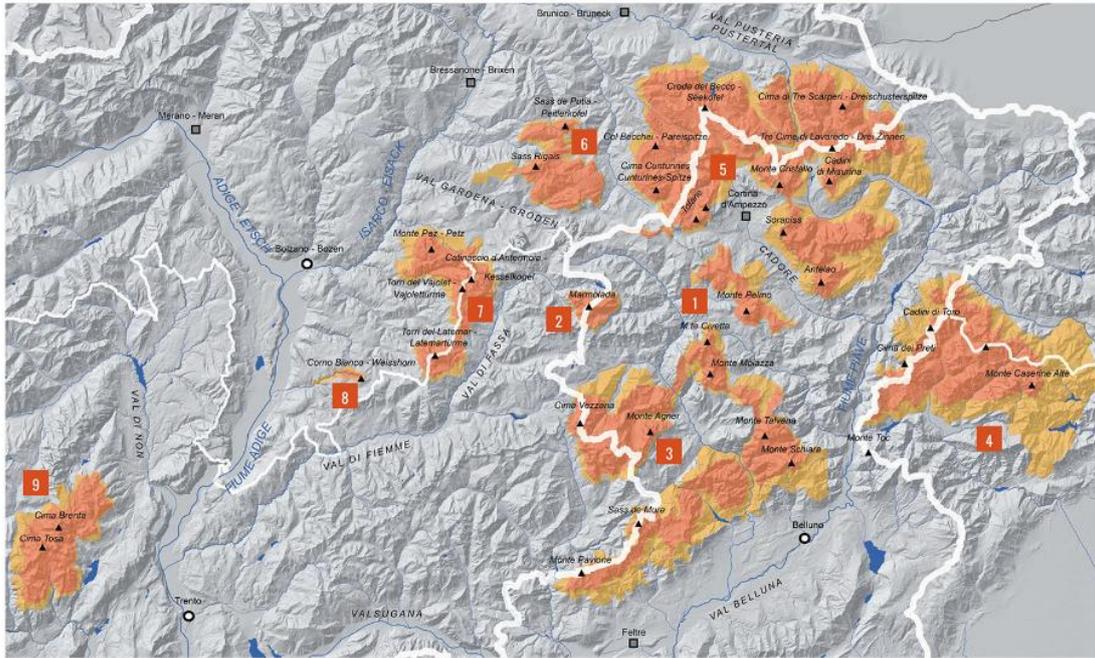
Figure 1: The Nine Systems of the Dolomites World Heritage Site. Source: Fondazione Dolomiti UNESCO (retrieved from *https://www.rifugiogiussani.com/dolomiti-unesco/*)

This is further explained by Vecco and Caust (2019), who exemplify the paradoxical relationship between UNESCO and tourism: on the one hand, the UNESCO status represents an avenue for increased revenue thanks to tourists that are attracted by the popularity of this label; on the other, the resulting increase in visitor numbers could threaten the integrity of the site by exceeding its carrying capacity.

The issue of the increasing tourist flows affects also the territory of the Dolomites. However, as noted by Della Lucia and Franch (2017), tourism is unequally distributed across the Dolomites. For example, while the southern parts of the Belluno province, such as those near Agordo and Feltre, suffer from lack of tourist arrivals, other locations, such as the municipality of Cortina d'Ampezzo and some parts of the Cadore territory, experience significant tourist flows, especially in the peak season. Among these areas, Elmi and Wagner (2013) identify some overtourism hotspots, i.e., the Tre Cime di Lavaredo/Drei Zinnen and the Marmolada massif.

The Tre Cime di Lavaredo/Drei Zinnen (in the System 5, visible in Figure 1) are recognised worldwide as the most iconic mountain range of the UNESCO Dolomites site. Their popularity as a primary tourist attraction has been amplified by all the content posted on social media featuring them (Bertocchi et al., 2021). However, the Tre Cime di

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Lavaredo/Drei Zinnen suffer from overtourism due to this attractiveness. A study conducted by Bertocchi, Camatti and Van der Borg (2021) has shown that tourist numbers in the Tre Cime/Drei Zinnen area increase exponentially in the peak season, reaching almost 14.000 visitors on some days in the summer of 2018. These numbers have only increased since that year. Due to the resulting issues, such as the aversion of local residents, many people are now advocating for regulatory measures, such as the closure of the only available road reaching these peaks, located in the territory of the town of Auronzo di Cadore (De Rosa, 2025). As a result of these uprisings, the municipality of Auronzo introduced a new system to access the Tre Cime/Drei Zinnen area in the summer 2025. Tourists that wish to park in the only available parking lot below these peaks need to book a spot in advance and pay an additional fee of 40€. This measure has been implemented as a first step to limit traffic congestion and reduce pollution in the area (De Rosa, 2025)

Similarly, the Marmolada in the System 2 receives a significant amount of tourist arrivals thanks to the wide offer in recreational activities. However, even the Marmolada is affected by overtourism and its negative consequences (Elmi and Wagner, 2013). In July 2022, a collapse of part of the glacier on the summit of the Marmolada caused an avalanche of snow and stones that killed 11 people and wounded other 8 (Rainews, 2024). This tragedy was partially caused by unusually high temperatures of the preceding months.

As this section illustrates, overtourism is not just a theoretical concept but this phenomenon, with its causes and negative consequences, can be actively applied to specific destinations, as seen in the case of the Dolomites.

1.2. Overtourism and Social Media

In this section the focus will shift from the phenomenon of overtourism to its relationship with social media in order to understand how social media can represent both a factor contributing to overtourism and a way to mitigate it.

1.2.1. Social Media and their Relation with Tourism/Overtourism

Munar and Jacobsen (2014) describe the Web 1.0 as the first step of the development of the World Wide Web. Its evolution is represented by the Web 2.0 or social media, where websites began to be characterised by interactive and user-generated content. In fact, the Internet has become a participatory platform where people can become the "media" by sharing information and collaborating with one another (Leung et al., 2013).

Song and Wondirad (2023) describe social media as a broad term that gathers together a variety of online sources of information that are created and shared by consumers for different reasons. Gretzel (2019) argues that social media refers to a family of online platforms and mobile applications that easily enable content creation and sharing. He also adds that social media are used all over the world despite the existence of differences in availability and platforms. In fact, Munar and Jacobsen (2014) argue that social media have different forms such as wikis, blogs, review websites and, most importantly for this thesis, social network sites, such as Facebook. The difference between these types relates to the different levels of interactivity and communication they enable.

Pan and Crotts (2012) have drawn a connection between social media and the social exchange theory. As already explained in the previous subchapter, this theory states that people are more likely to adopt behaviours they perceive as rewarding while avoiding those that lead to excessive costs. If this theory is applied to the phenomenon of social media, it can be found that users post on social media for three main reasons, i.e., expected gain in reputation, anticipated reciprocity of other users and altruism.

Due to their popularity and availability, social media have become one "mega trend" that has significantly impacted the tourism sector (Leung et al., 2013). However, the relationship between social media and tourism is complex and, in a way, mutual. On the one hand, tourists use social media for many different reasons such as information searching and gathering but also experience sharing in order to reduce their uncertainty about a destination they would like to visit (Song & Wondirad, 2023). Even Gretzel (2019) argues that social media actively influence tourists in their decision-making, effectively transforming the tourism sector as a whole. On the other, he also underlines

how even tourism changes social media due to the extensive content that tourists post on these platforms, ultimately leading to their development and improvement.

The relationship between tourism and social media permeates each stage of the journey undertaken by the consumer/tourist (Singh, 2021). The pre-trip stage is the moment where social media are used most extensively because they expose users to the travelling content posted by other individuals, effectively making them perceive the necessity to travel. Social media are important in this step as a source of information: they enable tourists to gather information about different tourism industry items to actively address this desire to travel. Malani et al. (2021) agree with this argument, stating that users rely on social media for trip planning in order to gather information on destinations, hotels, restaurants, attractions and general activities.

Furthermore, Singh (2021) underlines that social media play an essential role in leading the tourist to the final decision to travel, as well as in the booking and buying process through the Internet. The most used social media in this initial stage are online reviewing channels, such as TripAdvisor. The influence of social media extends also to the during-trip stage. First, social media are a reliable source of information during the trip as they provide the tourists with quick and accurate feedback while they are travelling. Social media can be employed to find extra information allowing tourists to explore nearby areas or other attractions beyond their original plans. Moreover, this stage is characterised not only by information searching but also experience sharing. During the trip users share content of their vacation in the form of photos, videos or posts to keep their followers updated; Facebook is one of the most favoured tools to do this.

Eventually, social media play an important role even during the post-trip stage, i.e., when active travelling has ended. In this stage, platforms such as TripAdvisor and Facebook support travellers in sharing their own experience through photos and videos, effectively functioning as a diary of their holiday. This content represents the assessment of the holiday done by the tourist: it can give insights to understand if they feel fulfilled by their overall experience. Regarding this, social media become crucial in evaluating and posting online all the elements of their experience, i.e., feedback on hotel services, attractions, restaurants (Malani et al., 2021). This evaluation becomes extremely valuable for future tourists who will rely on it during their own pre-trip stage. In fact, it allows

future travellers to gain insights not only into general travel services and destinations but also into which sources of information were considered most helpful by those that travelled before them (Singh, 2021)

Social media are not just used by tourists but also by tourism organisations, including Destination Marketing Organisations and other tourism-related companies. In fact, social media become tools for these tourism organisations because they enable them to directly connect with individual tourists and provide them with the right information based on their preferences and needs (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). In this sense, social media can be integrated with more traditional ways of advertising a destination to make its marketing easier and cheaper (ibid.). Social media are becoming increasingly important also for the hospitality sector. Hotels, dining options and all other tourism-related companies can rely on them to understand customers' preferences and opinions in order to respond to them accordingly and improve their offer (Leung et al., 2013).

To sum this up, it can be argued that social media are playing a crucial role in tourists' travelling decisions as well as in tourism operations and management, namely in both demand and supply (ibid.)

1.2.2. Social Media as Contributing to Overtourism

Solanky and Gupta (2021) argue that social media are considered one of the most significant causes for overtourism. This hypothesis is supported by Gretzel (2019), who states that social media have been linked to the phenomenon of overtourism in recent years. He emphasises how social media can be considered "catalysts of overtourism" (2019, p.5). First of all, social media encourage users to travel worldwide in order to have the opportunity to share their experiences on these platforms: he even argues that some tourists consider the content they gather on their vacation more important than the vacation itself.

In addition, social media do not only foster travel to all kinds of locations but also influence people to visit specific destinations that are considered "instagrammable" or "must-see". Travelling to these places allows tourists to gather content about destinations

and build a higher reputation among their followers by posting it online. This directly aligns with one of the key motivations for social media posting mentioned in the previous section, i.e., reputation building. Additionally, tourists post on social media not only to build their reputation among their followers but also due to the phenomena of FOMO, i.e., Fear of Missing Out, and YOLO, i.e., You Only Live Once, that induce tourists to impress their network online by taking part in trips (Solanky & Gupta, 2021).

This type of behaviour leads to a sharp increase in tourist arrivals in specific destinations, as Song and Wondirad (2023) affirm. However, this increase in tourist flows is not always positive. Lee et al. (2020) argue that social media could worsen overtourism because social media expose tourists to a very limited amount of information: this means that more and more visitors are attracted to only few already famous destinations or to places that are still unknown and underdeveloped and, as such, not ready to deal with tourist arrivals in a sustainable way.

A clear example that exemplifies how social media contributes to overtourism is the case of Barcelona, which can be considered one of the most visited cities in the world. Due to this large number of tourist arrivals, Barcelona is among the cities that most suffer from overtourism. Alonso-Almeida et al. (2019) focused on the analysis of the impact of social media on a particular national group of tourists travelling to this Spanish city, namely Chinese tourists. Their study underlines how Chinese individuals with higher income are most likely to travel to Europe and Barcelona is one of their favourite destinations. A key factor in this trend is the inclusion of Barcelona in all trip packages featuring Spain offered by online travel agencies in China.

They also argue that Barcelona has become so popular also due to its image on social media. As previous research has proven, social media play a crucial role in the decision-making of Chinese tourists: they usually consult online travel reviews before deciding the destination of their next trip. Moreover, Chinese people usually share a lot of content about the places they visit, reinforcing the desire to travel to Barcelona among other users. The authors conclude that the exposure to content about Barcelona posted by tourists, especially Chinese ones, could increase the demand for trips towards this city, inevitably causing overtourism. This issue is worsened also by the absence of an effective

tourism management plan in Barcelona, making it even more difficult to control these tourist flows.

A further example of how social media can contribute to overtourism worldwide is represented by the platform TikTok. Wengel et al. (2022) argue that TikTok has now become crucial in shaping travel decisions of tourists. This social network has the power to attract thousands of users to previously unknown destinations after they are portrayed in viral videos posted on the platform. The authors (ibid.) exemplify this phenomenon using the case of two destinations in Hainan, an island province of China. They underline how these two previously unknown locations quickly rose to international fame after their portrayal on TikTok. This popularity led to an exponential increase in tourist flows, creating many issues for the environment and local communities, which can be closely related to the dynamics of overtourism.

Gretzel (2019) concludes by stating that social media encourage people to visit specific destinations and influence behaviour of tourists in these locations despite being only one of the reasons why overtourism occurs. Song and Wondirad (2023) align with this argument underlining that social media are not a critical enabler of overtourism despite being partially responsible for it.

1.2.3. Social Media to Mitigate Overtourism

Song and Wondirad (2023) argue that social media alone does not significantly impact overtourism: only if it is combined with other variables social media and its content can effectively lead to overtourism. Moreover, they provide examples to prove how social media can be weaponised to mitigate overtourism. Social media enables individuals to make more informed decisions about their next trip: users can use social media in the pre-trip stage to avoid destinations that are already overcrowded by analysing the content posted by other people. Moreover, Malani et al. (2020) explain that social media can also be used by stakeholders to change tourist behaviour by not posting about environmentally fragile destinations while advertising lesser visited places in order to attract more tourists there. Additionally, social media can contribute to spreading best practices that foster ecologically responsible behaviour, leading to more sustainable

solutions among all tourists and other stakeholders (Song & Wondirad, 2023). Gretzel (2019) also proposes the use of social media through gamification as a way to make users aware of the problem of overtourism while showing the most appropriate behaviour to respect the environment.

A notable example of how social media can help mitigate overtourism is represented by Venice, often referred to as the capital of overtourism (Kryczka, 2019). Venice faces a very big challenge, namely a rapidly growing tourism industry: the city is visited by more than 70.000 per day and this number increases during specific events such as the Carnival or the International Film Festival (ibid.). This issue is exacerbated by the arrival of large cruise ships in the city. In order to tackle the problem of overtourism, the city launched the #EnjoyRespectVenezia campaign in 2017 with the support of the UNWTO.

This initiative was conducted through social media and other official channels. The campaign aimed at directing tourist flows toward less-popular parts of Venice, for example Mainland Venice and the other islands in the lagoon, while also raising awareness on the importance of respecting the environment. Additionally, the slogan was also used to name a dedicated website that allows visitors to check the predictions of tourist arrivals in the city and to plan their trip on less crowded days. The case of Venice shows how social media can play an important role in mitigating overtourism if they are used strategically to make people aware of this problem while also providing tourists with practical solutions for more responsible travel.

To sum this all up, many scholars debate whether social media contribute to or mitigate overtourism. However, they all agree that the answer depends on how social media are used by both stakeholders and tourists. Nonetheless, these experts agree that social media have a very strong impact on tourism as a whole, particularly on overtourism.

1.3. Tourism and Online Communities

This section provides an overview of the concept of community and its evolution into online communities, with particular attention on one kind of online communities, i.e.,

Facebook groups. It explores their characteristics and also their relationship with tourism. Eventually, some examples of Facebook groups related to tourism are listed to provide a practical application of this tool.

A community is described by Dippelreiter (2008, p.4) as a group of people who interact with one another to "develop knowledge, share experience and build up their own identity". Traditionally, communities were linked to a specific place due to the requirement of physical proximity. Nowadays, the rise of technologies, in particular the development of social networks and the Web 2.0, has enabled these communities to transition into virtual spaces: communities can now be independent from physical constraints (Dickinson et al., 2017). This distinction aligns with the difference between traditional and online communities emphasised by Zabudská and Pompurová (2024): while traditional communities are location-dependent, online communities do not require physical closeness. The authors further define online communities as "groups of individuals who interact and communicate through electronic means" (ibid., p.2). Additionally, they describe them as social groupings in a virtual environment gathering individuals who share opinions, interests and purposes. Lee and Hyun (2015) expand on this concept, noting that online communities, including blogs, instant messaging services and also social networks, enable users to socialize more easily. Bowen and Whalen (2017) argue that online communities are characterised by shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and also a sense of moral responsibility towards other users. They also affirm that online communities are used by members to develop personal relationships with other members in a virtual space.

Online communities have been studied from different perspectives by different scholars. Special attention has been given to their connection with tourism (Zabudská & Pompurová, 2024). Online communities in tourism are characterised by the "ability to help users meet their desires and needs regarding travel-related knowledge" (Lee & Hyun, 2015, p.427). This type of online communities allow potential travellers to gain unbiased information about specific destinations or travel products generated by other travellers, effectively influencing their booking and purchasing decisions (ibid.). However, not all online communities in tourism function in the same way. Zabudská and Pompurová (2024) identify three main categories of online communities in tourism based on the type of information published on them. The first category includes online communities

focused on primary tourism offerings, which provide information only about attractions in destinations. Some of these communities, i.e., audiovisual communities, rely on photos and videos shared by members showcasing natural and cultural attractions. Others, i.e., promotional communities, provide information about social events taking place in the destination, featuring content shared exclusively by external enterprises.

The second category comprises online communities focused on secondary tourism offerings, i.e., information on services essential to the trip such as accommodation, tour operators and transportation. These can be divided into two categories: on the one hand, reference communities rely on moderators and members who send hyperlinks to platforms providing details on accommodation, dining and transportation; on the other, discussion communities enable members to interact and share posts about tourism services (such as accommodation and dining options) or general tourism infrastructure (such as insurance, transportation, currency exchange).

The third category is represented by mixed online communities, which are a combination of both the previous ones. They can be further divided into promotional communities, where external businesses provide information on events and packaged tours, specifying date, time and location, and versatile communities, where members give advice to one another employing discussion posts, audiovisual material and hypertext links. After this classification, the authors underline how exchanging advice is at the foundation of versatile communities, making them have a very high average number of members.

Zabudská and Pompurová (2024) also provide insight into members' engagement, i.e., the average number of comments per post. They emphasise that the size of an online community is not the only factor influencing engagement. Rather, they argue that online communities in tourism can be successful only if there is an effective community management, i.e., a strong influence of the administrators, whose content curation leads to good quality in the posts.

Despite differences in typology, engagement and size, it can be finally argued that online communities play a significant role in today's society because consumers trust them to make purchases in the tourism sector (Nguyen, 2023)

1.3.1. Facebook Groups and Online Communities in Tourism

This section focuses on a specific type of online community, i.e., Facebook groups. Facebook was launched in 2004 and, since then, it has remained one of the social networks with the highest number of users worldwide (Nguyen, 2023). Among its many features, Facebook groups is considered one of the most popular ones as it allows users with shared interests to connect, exchange information and share experiences (Pi et al. 2013). In this sense, Facebook groups function exactly as online communities, creating connections between members who share common goals and interests.

Park et al. (2009) provide a list of four needs, or gratifications, that drive users to enter Facebook groups: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information. The need for socializing brings people to use this feature on Facebook to interact with other users and feel part of a larger community. Entertainment gratification relates to the need to satisfy the desire for leisure and amusement. Users also use Facebook groups to seek and maintain their status thanks to their participation in an online community. Finally, individuals join Facebook groups to seek information about events, products or services. Moreover, once users have joined Facebook groups, they are often willing to share their knowledge within them. Pi et al. (2013) emphasise that Facebook group members develop such a strong sense of belonging for a group that they feel encouraged to share their own knowledge, also because they find even enjoyable helping others by spreading their own information.

This behaviour is further strengthened when this enjoyment in helping others is reinforced by fostering a sharing culture in the Facebook group. Administrators and moderators play a crucial role in achieving this. In fact, they can set up rewards or punishments for correct or wrong behaviour on the social network. Admins can also organise online activities to foster interaction among members and make them feel as an integral part of the group. Eventually they could also provide positive feedback on shared content because this can enhance members' self-worth (ibid.).

This kind of contribution by users on social media, such as Facebook groups, is known as User-Generated Content (UGC), which is defined by Nguyen et al. (2023, p.2)

as " any form of content (images, video, text, audio) uploaded by users to the online platform through media to share information about products, services or suppliers". The authors continue by stating that UGC plays a crucial role in the decision-making processes of other users because the information shared by their peers is perceived to be more trustworthy than the one provided by official sources and marketers.

A significant form of UGC on Facebook groups is the one connected to travel and tourism: this UGC is mostly connected to hospitality services, travel and other users' experiences (ibid.). However, the authors underline how UGC is not only crucial in providing members of Facebook groups with useful information about specific destinations but also in inspiring them to travel in the first place and in influencing them to choose a particular destination. However, Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) affirm that the discussion on whether UGC can be trusted is still ongoing. In fact, many limits are represented by the relationship between source and receiver, the differences in the presentation of contents and also in the motivations for sharing this content. Nguyen et al. (2023) provide advice to improve the quality of UGC in Facebook groups: group admins and moderators should not only encourage members to post opinions, reviews and content but also use all functions of Facebook groups such as creating sub-groups, chats, hosting Q&As. Another way to enhance the quality of the posts in Facebook groups is reviewing the content and collaborating with high quality reviewers such as travel experts and bloggers.

Zabudská and Pompurová (2024) analyse various online Facebook communities in tourism, listing some of the most substantial ones, such as *Girls LOVE Travel®*, and *Best Destinations To Travel*. *Girls LOVE Travel®* is a private Facebook group created in 2015, which now counts over 1.5 million members. Its primary purpose is to connect women who travel worldwide. In contrast, *Best Destinations To Travel* was founded in 2018 and it connects more than 1.2 million people. Moreover, even Italy hosts many influential and large groups such as *Discover Italy | Best Places and Travel Tips,* which has more than 800.000 members. Notable mention is *Ragazze in Gamba*, which can be considered similar to *Girls LOVE Travel®* as its purpose is to spread the passion to travel among women and, through that, empower them. Another group worth mentioning, especially considering the focus of this thesis on the mountain environment, is *Gente che va in montagna una volta l'anno e si sente Messner (*People who hike once every year

and feel like Messner, referring to the famous Italian alpinist Reinhold Messner), which has more than 70.000 followers. These are just a few examples of the many Facebook groups that connect users with the same interests in the virtual environment.

2. **Methodology**

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodology used to investigate how social media can be employed to mitigate overtourism considering the specific case study of the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*. The thesis aims at answering the following research questions:

1. RQ1: Is it possible to employ social media, in particular online communities in the form of Facebook groups, to mitigate overtourism?
2. RQ2: Which are the strategies that can be implemented, both online and in the outside world, in order to achieve this goal?

Considering these two research questions, the overall aim of this research is to explore whether and how social media, in particular online communities in the form of Facebook groups, can be leveraged to mitigate overtourism. Before delving into the case study, secondary sources were analysed in the previous chapter to build a theoretical foundation and to describe the issue of overtourism, its causes and consequences and, most importantly, its connection to social media. Additionally, Chapter 1 also provided an overview of the Dolomites, which represent the geographical focus of this thesis.

2.1. Data Collection and Analysis

After the introductory chapter, the research will focus on the analysis of a case study, namely the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*. This case study was selected due to two main reasons. The first reason is the direct involvement in its creation, which becomes particularly relevant because it allows access to a complete set of original data on all the aspects concerning the group and its internal functioning. The second reason is the group's relevance in the context of overtourism: the peculiar geographical area of the Dolomites can be used to understand the issue of overtourism by applying it to this specific destination.

The research on the case study will be conducted by employing both quantitative and qualitative analysis, which will both be carried out using primary data. Employing a

mixed-method approach in this research, combining both quantitative and qualitative analysis, is consistent with the increasing use of such approach in social media research and particularly in studies related to Facebook (Snelson, 2016). On the one hand, the quantitative analysis will be conducted using primary data retrieved directly from Facebook using the tool of Facebook Insights. This will allow to gain a better understanding of the group's growth trends, the demographics of the members and their behaviour and engagement. This data generally refers to the period between the creation of the group and the present but a more detailed analysis will be conducted taking into consideration the data acquired in the time range between January and March 2025.

The decision to focus on a specific period of time derives from the application of the theory by Franz et al. (2019). According to these scholars (ibid.), an analysis on Facebook data has to be undertaken considering a specific scope. In order to achieve this, the filter feature of Facebook is employed to capture the same data in a specific timeframe. Furthermore, the quantitative analysis will help identify the types of shared content that are more relevant for the members. In this sense, examples of posts, including the number of reactions, likes and comments received by each of them, will be collected and copied from Facebook in order to be further analysed. On the other hand, a brief qualitative analysis will be carried out using primary data regarding members' opinion on the usefulness of the group.

In order to achieve this, some comments of members will be selected and analysed considering their significance for the overall discussion. This aligns with the theory provided by Franz et al. (ibid.), who argue that qualitative Facebook data are usually examined by applying a content analysis of posts. In order to ensure the respect of privacy guidelines, usernames will be blurred. Blurring users' personal information appears particularly important because an analysis of Facebook communities can potentially violate the privacy rights of users if protective measures are not taken. In fact, members of a Facebook group do not expect their content to be analysed. In this context, maintaining the anonymity of users becomes crucial when conducting the research (ibid.). Furthermore, the structure and organisation of the Facebook group will be outlined using the framework provided by the Community Canvas.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis will be essential in laying the foundations for the following competitor analysis. The competitor analysis will be conducted to investigate other online Facebook communities related to the Dolomites, mountain destinations and travel in Italy in general, which will be selected according to their significance for the case study. These groups will be analysed to underline commonalities and differences not only among them, as previously done by Zabudská and Pompurová (2024), but also in relation to *Dolomites for Beginners*. Additionally, the competitor analysis will be used as a tool to identify their best practices that could potentially be adopted by the group. In this regard, the competitor analysis will lay the foundations for understanding which strategies can be adopted to mitigate overtourism in the Dolomites, both in the group and in the outside world, effectively addressing the second Research Question. These strategies will be divided into two major categories, namely the ones that will remain anchored in the virtual environment of this social network and the ones that will expand the reach of *Dolomites for Beginners* outside its virtual borders.

3. Case Study: the Facebook Group *Dolomites for Beginners*

This chapter presents the analysis of the case study of this thesis, namely the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*. Section 3.1 outlines the process that led to the creation of the group. It describes how a niche was identified and how a distinct identity, along with a motto, was established using the theory of the Golden Circle by Simon Sinek. It also provides insights on the creation of the first posts and how they were shared across other similar groups with the support of screenshots taken from Facebook. Section 3.2 presents a statistical analysis of who participates in the community, including the growth in the number of members and their demographic details such as age, gender and geographical distribution.

The next section employs the theory behind likes, comments and shares to analyse the engagement of these members. In particular, it analyses different types of posts that received more engagement using real examples. Moreover, the analysis continues by examining which days and time ranges are more popular for posting. Additionally, some appreciation posts by members are presented to understand how this engagement has effects on real-life trips. Finally, section 3.3 of this chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of how the community is structured and organised by employing the Community Canvas framework.

3.1. Creation of the Facebook Group

The Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners* was created on the 17th October 2023 as part of an assignment for the course *IT for Tourism Services*, taught at the University of Bergamo by Professor Nicola Cortesi. The aim of this project was to learn how to open and to develop an online community, in the form of a Facebook group, and acquire as many members and engagement as possible. The process to create this group was clearly structured. Facebook was chosen as at present it is the best social network for creating online communities, both due to the sheer number of users (more than 3 billion) and to the number of existing online communities. Basically, for every topic one can think of, there are already one or more existing Facebook communities specific on that topic.

The first step consisted in finding a topic that could be of interest for the group's founder (from now on called "the admin") and also of potential future members. In this regard, a niche connected to this topic had to be found. Niche is a word derived from the Latin *nidus*, which means *nest*, suggesting a safe space. Applying this concept to an online community, a niche is a space where members with shared goals and interests can feel confident and develop relationships with each other by sharing their knowledge (Pente, 2014).

In the case of this assignment, the niche had to respect specific requirements: it had to be related to a topic of the admin's liking, as already mentioned, it had to be related to the travel and tourism sector and it had to be original. In order to assure its originality, preliminary research on Facebook was necessary. In fact, each student had to check if a similar niche had already been found by other users and adjust their own niche accordingly in order to avoid any duplicates. In regards to the Facebook group subject of this research, the admin decided to find a niche that could be connected to her own home territory, namely the Dolomites. However, research on the platform highlighted the presence of many different groups related to this specific mountain range or themes connected to it. More details on other groups related to the Dolomites will be provided in the next chapter of this thesis.

One of the most important choices when creating a new online community is that of finding a proper name for the community. Facebook algorithm, in fact, gives more visibility to groups whose names are often searched for in the Facebook group search bar. The issue of finding the best name was solved by addressing a specific type of users entering these groups, i.e., "beginners". In the initial phases of creation, the admin defined "beginners" as individuals without proper training who still wanted to explore the Dolomites safely. However, the admin soon recognised that this definition of "beginners" was too limited and decided to expand it. Now the definition includes all users who have never been to the Dolomites and use Facebook as a tool to gather as much information as possible about this territory during their planning process, mostly in the pre-trip stage.

This behaviour directly aligns with the importance of social media in the pre-trip stage underlined in the first chapter of this thesis. The admin had noticed that most other groups were mainly addressing tourists who already had some form of training and, most

importantly, prior knowledge of the Dolomites. Having found this gap in the many Facebook groups connected to the Dolomites, the admin decided to establish the Facebook group called *Dolomites for Beginners*.

The second step of group creation was to identify a specific identity that could be representative of the Facebook group. In order to find this identity and, through this, create a community that could connect people effectively, the Theory of the Golden Circle by Simon Sinek was employed, which can be applied to organisations, businesses, brands and also communities (TED, 2013).
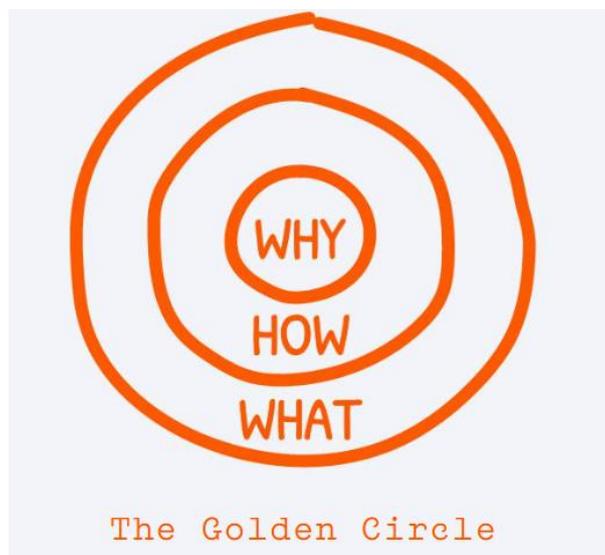

Figure 2: The Golden Circle by Simon Sinek. Source: https://simonsinek.com/golden-circle/

Simon Sinek explains that all communities are based on three different elements that are used to communicate and, in turn, inspire other individuals, i.e., *what, how* and *why*. The *what* refers to what a community does: usually every single community is aware of this aspect. The *how* relates to how these communities accomplish what they do, which can be often connected to their Unique Selling Proposition: most communities know *how* they do what they do. However, it is rare to find a community that really knows *why* it does what it does, namely its core purpose or belief, which ultimately defines the reason for the existence of that community. Sinek emphasises that too many communities focus on the *what* instead of the *why* because it is easier and requires less resources. However, he argues that successful companies and communities are the ones that communicate focusing on the *why* because "*people buy why you do it, not what you do*" (ibid.).

This principle is directly linked to the structure of the human brain, which can be divided into two major sections. The external part, corresponding to the *what,* is responsible for rational and analytical thought, while the inner section, representing the *how* and *why*, governs people's feelings, such as trust and loyalty, as well as individual decision-making processes. Applying this to the creation of a Facebook group, the key to establishing a successful online community is to build it around the *why*. In fact, this methodology enables people to connect with the community on an emotional level and, in this way, attract only those users who share the beliefs of the admin.

In the case of the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*, all the three elements of the golden circle were considered upon creation in order to establish a successful community. The *why* was established through its connection to the name of the community and its relationship with the concept of beginners. In this sense, the *why* relates to the community's main purpose of helping members with no prior knowledge discover the Dolomites by providing general information and insights on easy itineraries and easily reachable attractions that do not require prior training. The *how* is mainly connected to the Unique Selling Proposition of the group, namely the fact that many online communities already recommend walks and pathways in the Dolomites but none explicitly targets tourists who first approach this territory without prior knowledge or training. The *what* refers simply to what the community accomplishes, i.e., sharing easy destinations in the Dolomites, referring mainly to the type of content that users can find and post in it.

To conclude the setup of the Facebook group, a few additional considerations are necessary. First, a payoff was coined: "*Mountains are calling… yes, even you*". Furthermore, in order to foster the creation of a more cohesive community, a specific target audience was identified. This was achieved by employing two segmentation criteria: demographic and lifestyle-based. From a demographic perspective, the group targets mainly seniors and families with children. From a lifestyle perspective, the group aims to connect individuals who share the same interest, namely having the opportunity to experience the Dolomites without specific training or prior knowledge. In this way, no specific age group was excluded and the segmentation resulted more comprehensive. Moreover, no specific target country was selected in order to include all travellers moving across the world. To maximise the accessibility of the group, English was chosen as the

official language. Lastly, some ground rules were established, which will be explained in the next section of this chapter.

Once the main structure of the Facebook group had been established (the "*how*" of the rule of the golden circle), some initial posts were created in order to attract the first users. The initial posts were designed using the same format in order to provide coherence in the content posted directly by the admin. After an initial greeting, the name of the destination/trail was clearly stated in bold character. The post was then divided into sections: the location of the destination (usually the name of the municipality followed by the province), information on how the destination can be reached by different means of transportation, the estimated needed time to visit the destination or complete the trail, the level of difficulty going from easy to difficult and then a general description, providing practical information about the destination/trail and also some additional tips related to other recreational activities, dining options or safety measures. The post ended with the inclusion of hashtags such as #DolomitesforBeginners or #NewBeginningsInNature. An example of these initial posts is provided in Figure 3 below. Every post was presented alongside a group of photos portraying the destination/trail in order to provide a visual representation to the members. These photos were selected among the ones taken by the admin or relatives and friends in order to ensure originality.
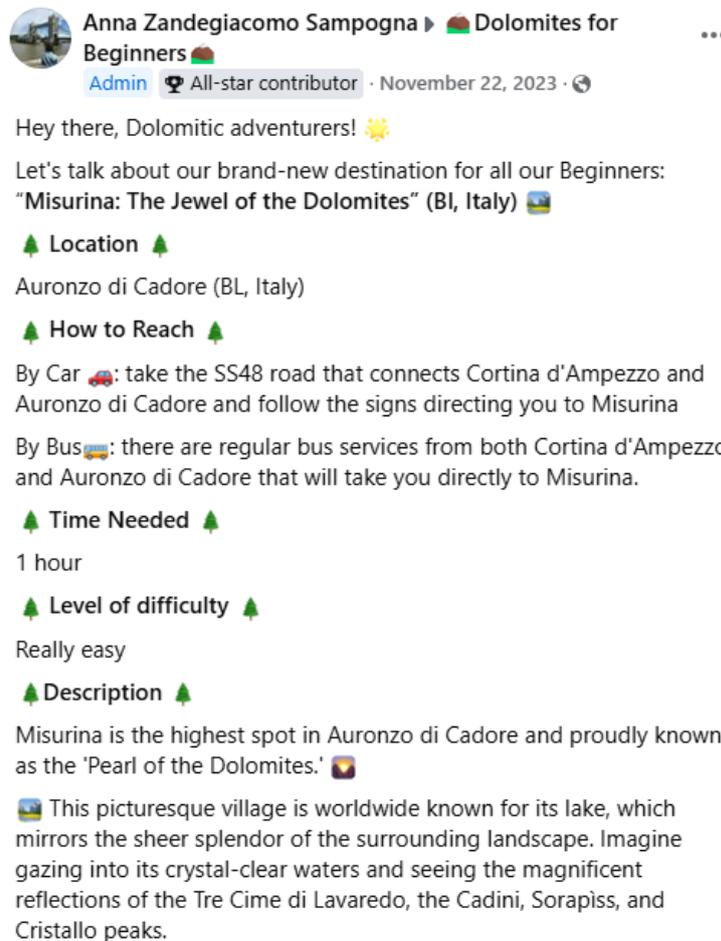
Figure 3: Example of Post. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [November 22, 2023]

The following step in the process of actively increasing the number of members in *Dolomites for Beginners* was to share these initial posts in other similar groups related to the Dolomites, global mountain destinations and travel in Italy in general. The goal was to enhance posts' visibility and, consequently, attract more users to *Dolomites for Beginners*. To ensure an effective strategy, an Excel file was created where all similar groups were listed. Figure 4 shows this Excel file, which is color-coded according to potential for sharing of each group. Groups coloured in white are the ones where sharing is appreciated, yellow is used to recognise those groups where sharing is allowed only following specific requirements while groups highlighted in red present many restrictions in terms of sharing. This Excel file was crucial also for tracking the number of reactions each post received in different groups.

Group Name	Privacy	Num. of members	Last update	Group type	Language	Area?	Linked page?	Sharing requirements?
Dolomitici!	Public	219808	2 days	Mountains,	Italian	Italy		shares only if necessary
Passione Dolomiti	Public	13448	10 h	Mountains, trekking	Italian	Italy		shares only if necessary
Le dolomiti...le nostre montagne	Public	13271	1 h	Dolomites and Prealpi, trekk	Italian	Italy		write the location of photos
Amici delle Dolomiti	Public	11195	8 h	Mountains, hotels	Italian	Italy	https://www.facebook.com	like the linked page + add friends
Escursioni nelle Dolomiti	Public	13369	5 days	trekking	Italian	Italy		none
Vacanze Italiane, Italy Holidays, Italien Urlaul	Public	4286	8 h	Holiday, Hotels	Italian, Engli	Italy	https://www.facebook.com	Like the linked page + add friends
Holiday in Italy Travel Group	Public	889	1 month	Holiday in Italy	English	Italy		None
Italy Experience. Your Holidays in Italy	Public	1580	3 days	Holiday in Italy, suggestions	English, Itali	Italy		none
Visit Dolomites	public	18123	9 h	dolomites, visit	english	Italy		none
Travelling in Italy	Public	70836	12 h	travel, Italy, food	English	Italy		no share
Dolomiti da sogno	Public	17812	4 days	people passionate about Do	Italian	Italy		none
Le dolomiti nel cuore	Publiv	2505	3 days	Mountains	Italian	Italy		none
Alps / Dolomites / Landscapes	Public	2768	17 h	mountains , landscapes	English	Italy		no collages
Quelli che le Dolomiti ce l'hanno nel cuore	Public	1744	2 days	photos, landscapes	Italian	Italy		none
Beautiful Mountains	Public (+ co	606024	12 h	hiking, nature and outdoors	English	all the world		none
World of mountains	Public	76939	2 days	nature, hiking	English	all the world		none
Mountain life	Public	22871	1 month	mountains	English	USA		none
Noi che amiamo le montagne	Public	59502	3 days	mountains	Italian	Italy		description of photos
Dolomites - Hiking and Trekking	Public (+co	57890	2 days	hiking	English	Italy		none
Dolomites. Via Ferrata, Hiking, Trekking, Van	Public	14652	5 days	many activities in the area	English	Italy		none
Hiking, Adventure, Trekking, Mountain & lake	Public	13874	4 h	lakes, mountain,	English	all the world		none
I <3 Dolomites - Best Places and Travel Tips	Public	6659	17 h	tips, dolomites	English	Italy		only in English
Italy Trip reports and Travel Tips	public	10236	30 min	tips, mountains, italy	English	USA		none

Figure 4: Excel file of similar groups (Own Representation)

At this point, a brief digression on posts' visibility on Facebook is necessary. The sequence of posts appearing on Facebook user's News Feed, i.e., the first page displayed after logging in, is determined by the algorithm employed by Facebook to show the contents of the users, called "Edgerank" (Birkbak & Carlsen, 2016). The term Edgerank refers to the "edges", which represent the relationship between content and users. The algorithm ranks these edges considering three different components of posts, i.e., affinity score, weight and time decay (Kincaid, 2010).

The affinity score measures the relationship between the users and the creator of a post: a post is more likely to appear in the News Feed if viewer and creator of the post have already interacted before. Additionally, each edge has a certain weight, i.e., the level of engagement of a post: a post with a higher number of likes, comments and shares will be prioritised in the News Feed. The last factor is time decay. As time passes, the post becomes less and less important according to the algorithm and will be less likely to be shown to users (Birkbak & Carlsen, 2016). However, the decay of a post can be postponed if users continue to interact with it through likes and comments.

By multiplying these factors between them, Edgerank generates a ranking of different edges, enabling a post with higher rank to be shown to a larger audience in their News Feed. Kincaid (2010) tries to clarify the Edgerank by stating that, if users want their post to remain visible in the News Feed, they have to ensure high engagement, i.e., users need to interact with the content for as long as possible. In the case of *Dolomites for Beginners*, sharing posts in relevant groups, such as those focused on the Dolomites,

mountain destinations and travel in Italy in general, helped expand their reach, increasing the likelihood of interaction among more users and, in turn, enhancing their visibility through Edgerank. This strategy, rooted in the theory of Edgerank, proved successful: real data about this success will be provided in the next section of this chapter.

3.2. Growth and Statistical Overview of the Group

As already mentioned in the previous section, understanding the algorithm at the base of Facebook was crucial to the success of *Dolomites for Beginners*. Figure 5 shows the growth in the number of members of the group from its creation to August 2025.
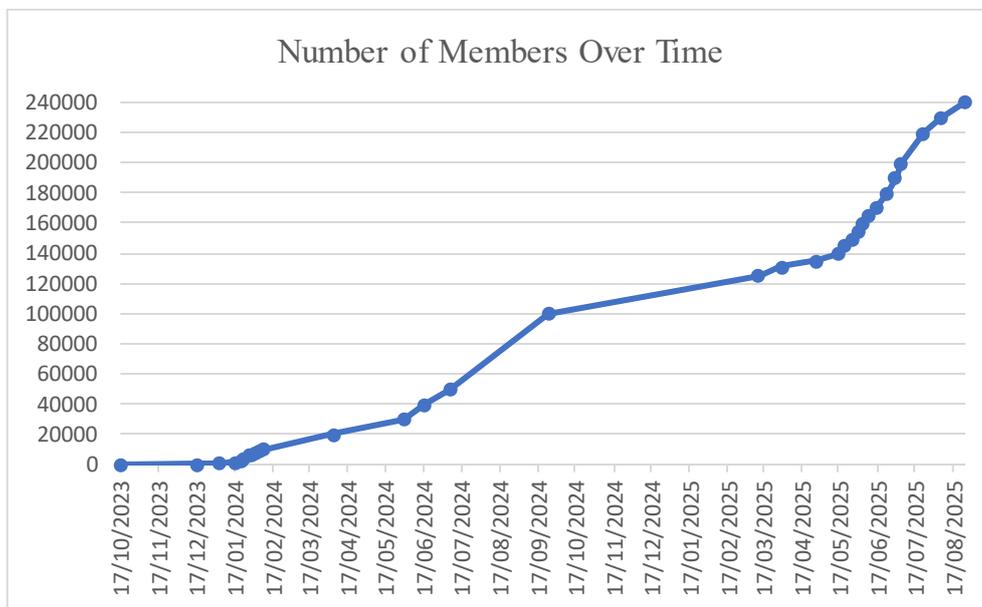
Figure 5: Number of Members Over Time (Own Representation)

This graph illustrates some key features of the growth in the number of members over time. First of all, this growth was not linear. It can be noticed that the number of members remained fairly stable until January 2024, i.e., three months after the creation of the group. Members started to increase and then rose dramatically only from January 2024, quickly reaching 10.000 members in early February 2024. After this, the growth remained steady until June 2024. In contrast, there was a rapid increase in the number of members between June 2024 and September 2024, i.e., from 30.000 to 100.000 members. This can be attributed to the rise in the number of visitors to the Dolomites in the summer

months. In fact, as more and more people decide to travel to this region, there is an increasing need for information, meaning that many of them try to gather as much advice as possible before and during their trip to the Dolomites (or post their photos when they have reached their destination).

Figure 5 also shows a decrease in the growth rate of the number of new members between September 2024 and April 2025, when only roughly 35.000 new users joined the group. This reduction may be attributed to two main factors. The first possible explanation is that the number of tourists in this area tends to drop in the winter months because snow and cold weather lead to a stop to many outdoor activities: this results in less people actively looking for information, even on Facebook. The second reason is that most potential members in this niche had already been reached and had already joined the group, reducing the likelihood of further growth. However, only the first reason proved to be true. In fact, Figure 5 shows that the number of members began to grow exponentially again from May 2025 until August 2025, increasing of about 100.000 members, namely from 140.000 to more than 240.000.

Figure 6 provides a more detailed analysis of the growth in the number of members during the first months after the creation of the group.
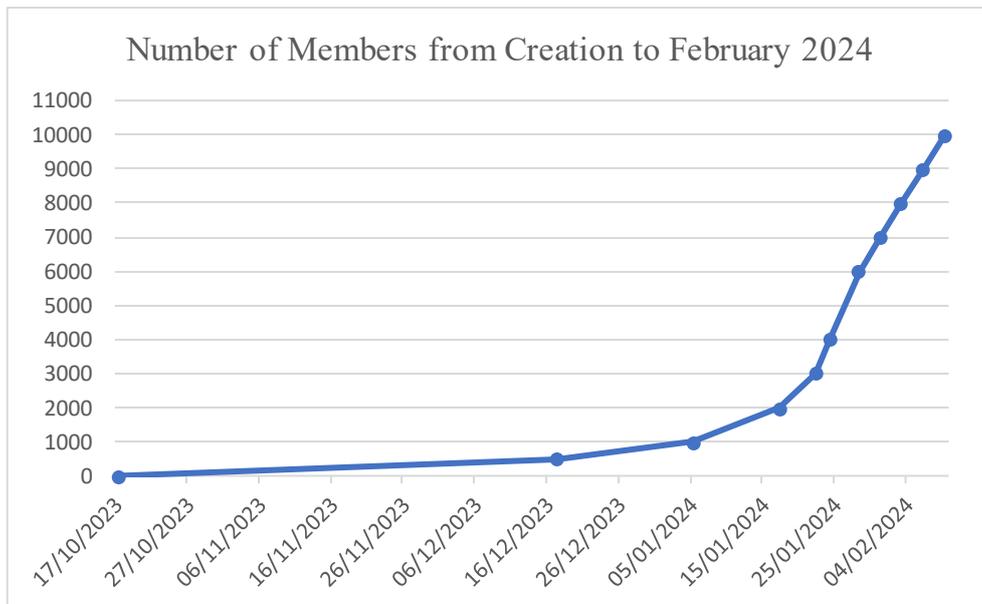

Figure 6: Number of Members from Creation to February 2024 (Own Representation)

As shown in Figure 6, there was only a minimal increase in the number of members until early January 2024. This could be due to the fact that the members belonging to this niche had not yet been reached. Between November and December 2023 one post was published each week in the main group and shared in the other similar groups. The goal was to make more and more users familiar with the community. As mentioned above, this strategy proved effective since the group grew from 1000 members at the beginning of January to 10.000 at the beginning of February 2024, gaining more than 9000 members in roughly a month. During this specific period, more posts were shared both in the group and in other similar communities in order to acquire more members.

A notable milestone is the introduction of the first chat dedicated to the group during the month of February 2024, i.e., Dolomite Trail Tips, which aimed at ensuring interaction among members, providing a space where members could exchange expert tips and support.

After an analysis of the growth in the number of members over time, it is necessary to provide some insights into the demographics of the members. This analysis can be conducted employing the statistical data provided by Facebook tool integrated in the graphical interface available to the group admins.
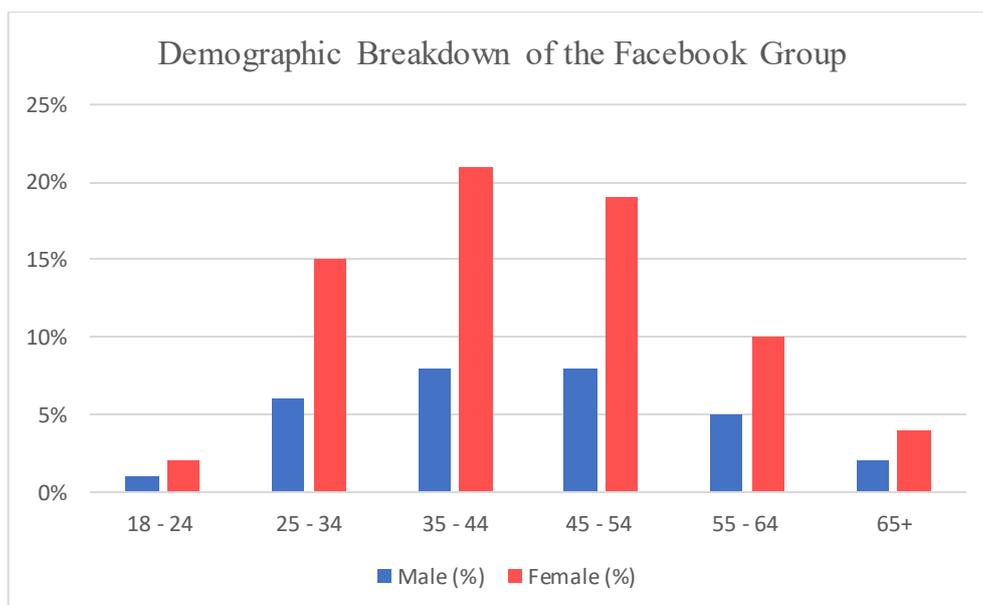

Figure 7: Demographic Breakdown of the Facebook group (Own Representation)

In Figure 7, a visual breakdown of the demographics of the members of *Dolomites for Beginners* is provided. The data, gathered during March 2025, shows that the group is mainly composed of female users, who represent 71% of the members, while male users account for the remaining 29%. The largest age group in the community consists of individuals aged between 35 and 44, representing 29% of the total, in particular 21% female and 8% male. They are followed by the age group 45 to 54 years, which constitutes 27% of the members, more specifically 19% female and 8% male. Older users represent a significant part of the membership: 15% of the total members belong to the age range between 55 and 64 years old (10% female and 5% male), while 6% are aged above 65 years (4% female and 2% male). Moreover, also younger generations, particularly users aged between 25 and 34 years, are significant in the community, accounting for 21% of the total membership. In contrast, only 3% of the members belong to the age group between 18 and 24 years.

The data shown illustrate that women constitute the majority of the members of *Dolomites for Beginners*, significantly outnumbering the number of men. This distribution in terms of gender is consistent with previous research: McAndrew and Jeong (2012) found that females are far more engaged in Facebook activity than males. Moreover, they spend much more time on this social network and generally have more friends on the platform (ibid.). Considering the data on the age groups, it can be noticed that most members of *Dolomites for Beginners* belong to Generation Y, also called Millennials, and Generation X. However, the presence of members over 60 years old demonstrates that visitors to the Dolomites are not only younger and more athletic people but also older individuals, who are gathering information online in order to travel to this territory. In contrast, the representation of members below 24 years old is significantly lower: this can be due to the fact that Facebook is not the most used platform among younger generations, i.e., Generation Z. This is emphasised by Alhabash and Ma (2017), who studied the use of different social media platforms among college students, which can be taken as representatives of this generation. They demonstrated that younger generations use Instagram and Snapchat much more than Facebook, which ranks only third among the social media platforms (ibid.).

This finding is further supported by the Pew Research Center, a nonprofit organisation that informs the public about trends and behaviours shaping the

contemporary world in different areas such as politics, science and also media (Pew Research Center, n.d.). In their research on social media use it can be easily noted that Facebook ranks only third among the most used platforms by individuals aged 18 to 29 after YouTube and Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2024). It is important to notice that the analysis of the age groups of members of *Dolomites for Beginners* perfectly aligns with the target group chosen upon creation of the group, i.e., families with children, which belong to Generation X and also Y, and seniors.

A further analysis can be conducted by taking into consideration the geographical origin of the members of *Dolomites for Beginners*. The majority of the members of the group are from the United States of America, which account for the 10% of the total membership. The United Kingdom ranks second in terms of membership origin and it is closely followed by several Eastern European countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Romania and Hungary. Italy and Germany play a significant role, primarily due to geographical position and proximity. This geographical distribution of the group's members is partially reflected by data provided by Dolomiti Superski, which is one of the largest ski resorts in the world, located in the Dolomites, more specifically between the Veneto and Trentino-Alto Adige regions. Dolomiti Superski offers its customers a unique ski pass that grants access to 12 different ski areas connected by this ski resort. Moreover, the resort provides support to tourists engaging in other winter activities, as well as during the summer months. Chiamulera (2024) analyses the data from the 2023-2024 winter season provided by Dolomiti Superski, stating that most of its customers are inevitably Italian but they are closely followed by tourists from Eastern Europe.

Furthermore, the data shows a huge increase in the number of American tourists on Dolomites' ski slopes during those years. Chiamulera (ibid.) explains that the increased popularity of the Dolomites as a ski destination among Americans can be attributed to the partnership between Dolomiti Superski and Ikon Pass. Ikon Pass, i.e., an international ski pass group based in the United States, included Dolomiti Superski as one of its partners in 2021. This agreement enables American skiers with an Ikon Pass to use Dolomiti Superski slopes without purchasing an additional ski pass. According to Chiamulera (ibid.), this partnership has attracted many more Americans to the Dolomites as a whole.

3.3. Engagement of Members

After having employed statistical data to analyse the growth in the number of members, their distribution in terms of age, gender and geography, this section aims at describing more in-depth members' engagement with the content posted in *Dolomites for Beginners*, by applying the theory to actual posts shared in the group, along with their statistical insights provided by Facebook.

Before analysing the engagement within *Dolomites for Beginners*, it is necessary to provide an overview of how Facebook users can engage with content. Kim and Yang (2017) identify three main engagement behaviours of users on Facebook, namely liking, commenting and sharing, which require different commitments from individuals. According to them, the action of liking a post requires the lowest level of commitment: users usually like posts that contain photos or videos because this type of content stimulates the five senses and, consequently, evokes an emotional response. The intermediate level is represented by commenting. When users comment on a post, it appears on their News Feed but only briefly. Moreover, users are more likely to comment on posts that contain logical information or that require an explicit answer to a request. In this sense, users do not tend to comment on posts with visual content because their reaction is cognitive and not affective and emotional. Lastly, sharing posts requires the highest level of commitment. When users share a post, it appears not only in the News Feed but also in their personal profile page. As a result, users are more likely to share posts if they align with their intended self-presentation on social media because they will remain visible to their network for a longer period of time (ibid.).

Analysing the posts with the highest levels of activity within *Dolomites for Beginners*, i.e., those receiving the most comments, likes and reactions, it is evident that informative posts are the ones creating the most engagement. These posts typically provide practical advice and detailed information, often in the form of description of itineraries or travel blogs, frequently employing hypertext links. This trend aligns perfectly with the primary purpose of the group: supporting tourists in their travels through the Dolomites by providing them with reliable information. Additionally, these posts tend to be the ones with the most shares overall.

An example of these posts with high engagement is shown in Figure 8, where a member, considered by Facebook a "rising contributor" due to their frequent posting, shares a comprehensive 12-day itinerary in the Dolomites. This itinerary is accompanied by a link to a more detailed guide and also a map that visually outlines the suggested itinerary. This post received more than 130.000 views, 600 likes, 90 shares and 86 comments where users express gratitude for the help and ask follow-up questions. Applying the theory behind Facebook user behaviour to this type of content, it can be stated that members share these posts and, in this way, make them appear on their profile page because they identify with the content, projecting their own future experiences onto these itineraries and actively imagining themselves embarking on similar ones.
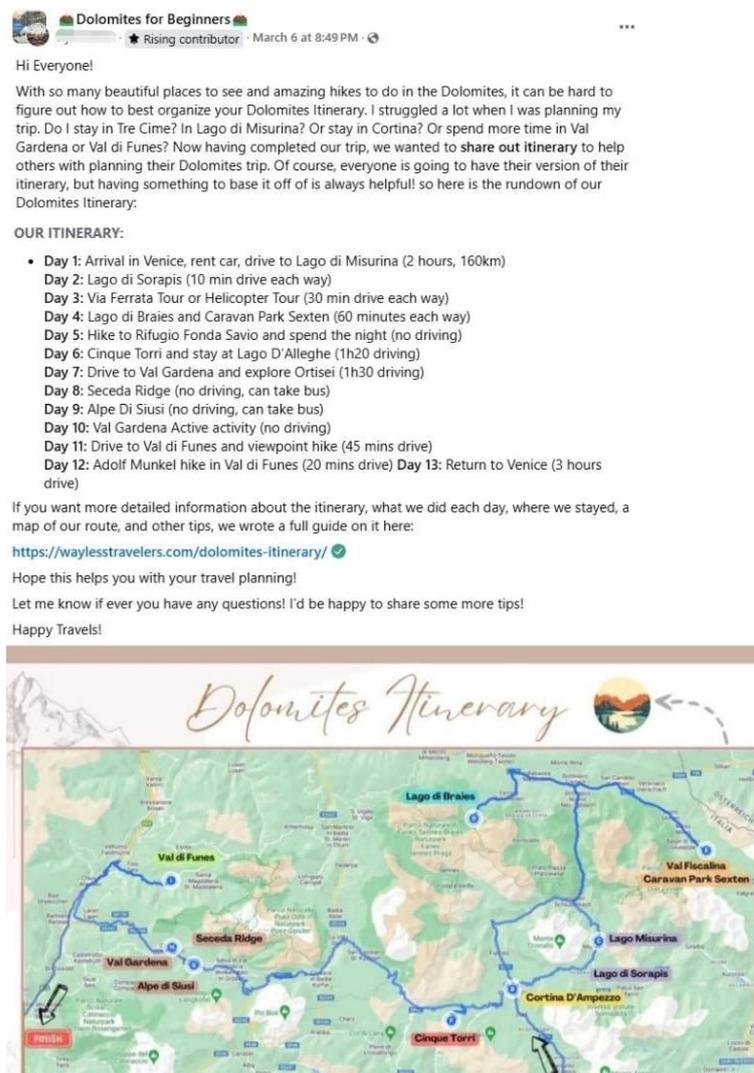
Figure 8: Example of Itinerary/Blog Post. Source: Facebook [Dolomites for Beginners], [March 6, 2025]

The second most popular type of post in the group consists of videos, which can appear in both vertical format, such as Instagram Reels, and horizontal format, such as Youtube videos, which can be either embedded in the post or attached via a link. This type of content generates a high average number of views, likes and shares, but it tends to receive fewer comments compared to what happens with blogs and itineraries. Even in this case, the engagement of the members of *Dolomites for Beginners* respects the theory of Facebook user behaviour. Videos, which utilize a sequence of images, are effective at provoking emotional responses, encouraging members to view and like the content while making them less inclined to comment on it (ibid.). An example of this is provided in Figure 9, where a member shares a link to a YoutubeVideo showcasing the Alpe di Siusi in South Tyrol. This post received over 30.000 views, 980 likes and 26 shares but only 17 comments, supporting the theory that videos lead to an affective response instead of a cognitive and, therefore textual, one.

Figure 9: Example of Video Post. Source: Facebook [Dolomites for Beginners], [March 1, 2025]

Analysing other types of posts, it is evident that text-based posts tend to receive less engagement overall. A practical example of this is presented in the next figure. Figure 10 features a textual post in which a member requires support in planning their next trip, specifically asking for suggestions on surrounding destinations that can be visited after exploring the Dolomites. This post received only 2.000 views, 15 likes, 1 share but a total of 43 comments. This reaction to the content proves the theory that textual posts elicit a

cognitive response rather than an emotional one. Consequently, the reaction of other users is usually commenting on the post rather than liking or sharing it. These comments vary a lot: some members simply answer to the request of the post, in this case listing potential destinations, while others engage with it even more, providing links to detailed guides or blogs about different possible options.
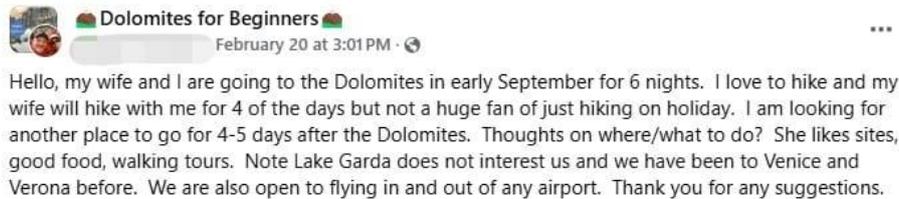

Figure 10: Example of Textual Post. Source: Facebook [Member of Dolomites for Beginners], [February 20, 2025]

As it was proved in the previous paragraph, engagement for purely textual posts remains very low. However, when the textual element is accompanied by visual content, i.e., at least one image, the post usually receives much higher levels of engagement, including more views, likes and comments.

In the post provided in Figure 11, an anonymous member requires information regarding the accessibility of San Candido, a town located in South Tyrol that is situated near several famous attractions in the Dolomites such as the Tre Cime/Drei Zinnen and the Braies Lake. Unlike the previous example in Figure 10, the member does not ask the question employing only a textual post but includes an image of a building located in San Candido. This addition proves to be successful because the post received over 14.000 views, compared to just 2.000 in Figure 10, along with 86 likes, 8 shares and 33 comments.

Figure 11: Example of Textual and Visual Post. Source: Facebook [Dolomites for Beginners], [March 4, 2025]

This pattern, shown by Figure 11, aligns with the theory provided above: text-based posts with visual content are effective in eliciting an affective response, reflected in the increased number of likes, and also a cognitive response in the form of comments, which provide helpful suggestions (ibid.). This is also stated by Hanifawati et al. (2019) who say that users usually prefer posts that include videos and images, rather than only text. In this sense, using an image attracts more attention not only to the post itself but to the text contained in it, encouraging users to interact more actively with it by commenting on it.

Engagement can vary not only in terms of type of posts but also in terms of time frame, namely when members engage with content in the group. Figure 12 provides an overview of the average number of times members post, comment or react to content during the days of the week. For this analysis the range between January and March 2025 was taken into consideration. As it is shown in Figure 12, there is not a significant difference in the engagement over the week. However, it can be noticed that Saturday and the weekend in general appear to be the most popular days.
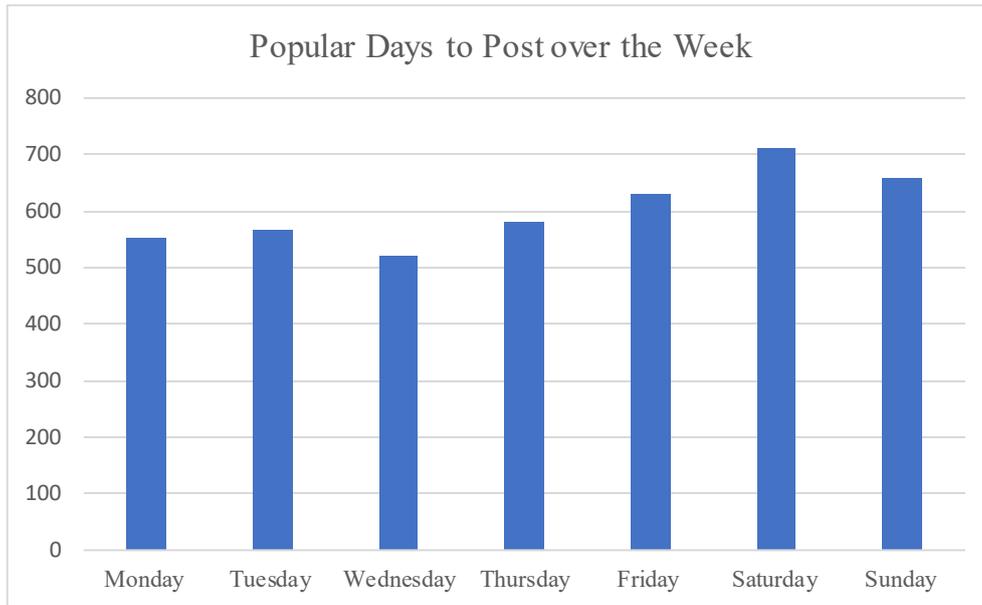
Figure 12: Popular Days to Post over the Week (Own Representation)

Figure 13 provides a more detailed analysis of the posting patterns of members in four specific time ranges: night (midnight to 5.00), morning (6.00 to 11.00), afternoon (12.00 to 17.00) and evening (18.00 to 23.00). Even in this case, the period between January and March 2025 is considered. It is evident that members post most frequently during the afternoon (12.00 to 17.00), reaching even 242 posts on Saturday afternoon, which is the day with the most posts overall, as also shown in Figure 12. In contrast, the night (midnight to 5.00) is the period with the least amount of posts overall. The other two time ranges present more variability across different days of the week: in some cases, namely on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday, members tend to post more in the evening while in others, such as on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, more posts are shared in the morning.

This posting pattern aligns with the findings by Kolowitch (2018), as cited by Singh (2023), who states that posting on Facebook between 13.00 and 16.00, namely in the afternoon, is more effective than in other time ranges. According to him, this is due to the fact that many users take a break from work during that particular period. Moreover, he argues that the worst times to post on Facebook are very early in the morning, i.e., before 8.00, and very late at night, i.e., after 20.00 (ibid.). Even in this case, the posting patterns of the group align with the theory.
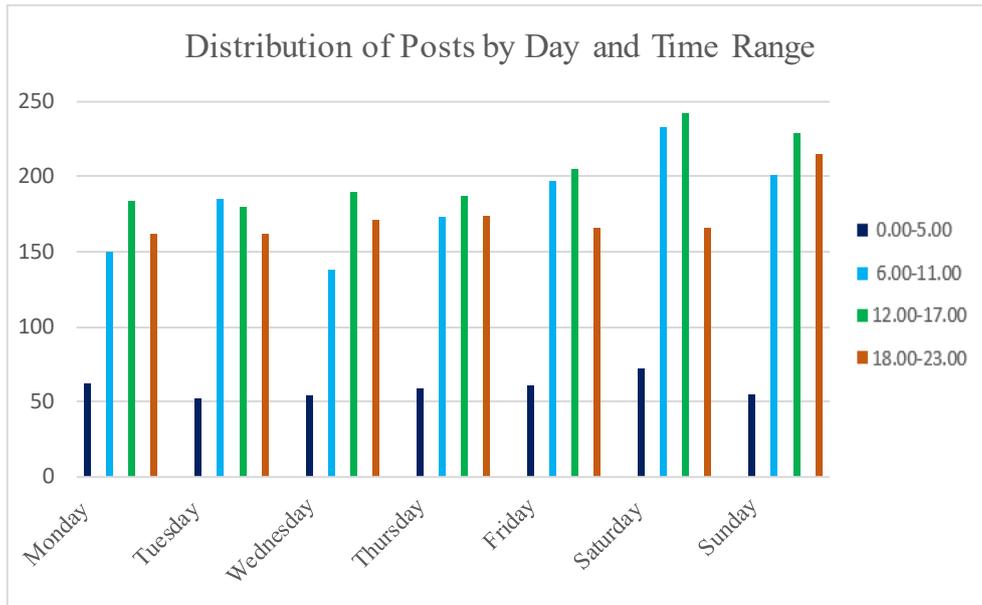
Figure 13: Distribution of Posts by Day and Time Range (Own Representation)

Beyond a purely statistical and engagement analysis, another indicator of the role of the group in influencing members' travel decisions is the presence of appreciation posts, i.e., messages in which members express their gratitude for the help and support they have received from their peers. While some appreciation posts can be found as comments to many posts, they are more frequent under posts celebrating milestones or anniversaries.

In Figure 14, for example, a member states that the group has proved so helpful in planning their first trip to the Dolomites that they will rely on it again for their next trip.
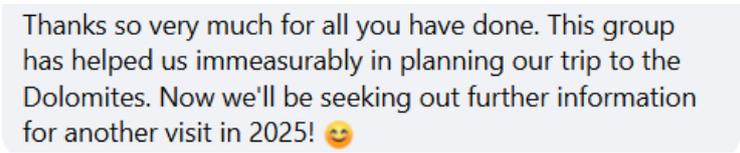
Figure 14: Appreciation Post 1. Source: Facebook [Dolomites for Beginners], [October 17, 2024]

Figure 15 features a comment in which a member shares how they used the group for their last trip and expresses gratitude for the information they gained through it. Moreover, they feel so grateful for the assistance they received that they intend to actively

engage with the community in the future by providing the same support to other peers. This is perfectly aligned with the collaborative purpose of the group.

Happy anniversary! I joined this group just in time for my 5 day trip to Ortisei at end of September. Everything I learned here made a huge difference to our absolute enjoyment of the Dolomites. Thank you all so much and I hope to be able to return the favour!

Figure 15: Appreciation Post 2. Source: Facebook [Dolomites for Beginners], [October 17, 2024]

Lastly, Figure 16 shows a comment that can be considered more significant than others. In fact, the user does not only express their gratitude for the creation of the group but shares how the group changed their overall opinion of the mountains since they had always preferred beach vacations. This demonstrates how *Dolomites for Beginners* plays a crucial role in directing tourism flows, not only within the Dolomites but also beyond them.

Thank you for creating this Group, i was a beach person and never have immagined to love mountains and hiking on trails.

Figure 16: Appreciation Post 3. Source: Facebook [Dolomites for Beginners], [October 17, 2024]

3.4. Structure and Organization of the Community

After providing an analysis of who participates in *Dolomites for Beginners*, the purpose of this next section is to analyze how this online community works internally. To achieve this goal, a specific framework is employed, namely the Community Canvas (2017, available at https://community-canvas.org/).

The Community Canvas, developed by the entrepreneurs Fabian Pfortmüller, Nico Luchsinger and Sascha Mombartz, was published in 2017. The authors underline how a common underlying structure could be found in all the communities they had created or participated in over the course of several years. As a result, they created this framework and made it accessible for free in order to provide people with a template to support them

in creating more cohesive and meaningful communities. They also state that this framework can be useful to several different organisations, fan clubs or HR departments. When applying the Community Canvas to the case study of this thesis, proper adjustments need to be made because this framework was created for physical communities. Despite this, it can still be considered useful to better understand the internal workings of this Facebook community.

The Community Canvas is divided into three different sections, i.e., Identity, Experience, and Structure, which are further divided into 17 themes, as illustrated in Figure 17.
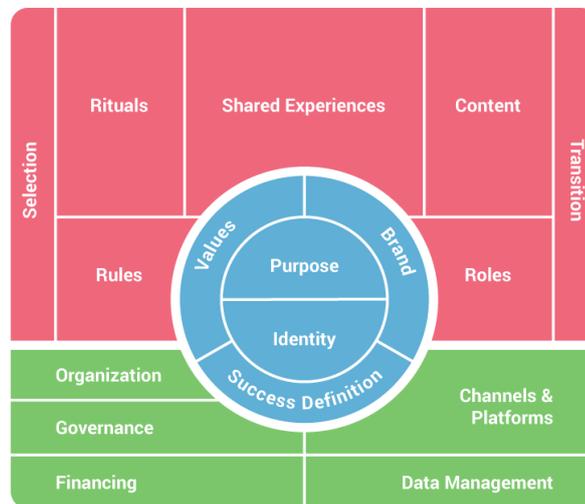
Figure 17: The Community Canvas. Source: https://community-canvas.org/

This paragraph will provide a description of the Community Canvas framework directly applying it to the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*. The first section of the Community Canvas is *Identity*, which focuses on less tangible aspects of a community, such as its foundational elements, the reason for its existence, its members and their belief system. In this sense, this section can be compared to the *why* of Simon Sinek's Golden Circle, explained above. The Identity section is structured as an onion, with its core represented by the community's purpose and identity.

The authors further divide the *Purpose* in two categories: internal and external. The internal purpose refers to the community's capacity of enabling its members to help each other and exchange knowledge. *Dolomites for Beginners* respects this factor because

its purpose is to provide members with a space where they can share information on destinations, attractions and trails that are easily accessible to everyone. In contrast, the external purpose relates to the broader effect of the community on the outside world. In this case, *Dolomites for Beginners* tries to actively direct tourism flows towards specific areas: this purpose will become central in the next chapters of this thesis.

The second core theme of Identity, *Member Identity*, refers to the specific group of people the community was built for, who share some common characteristics, also called commonalities. While the authors list several types of commonalities, only two of them can be applied to *Dolomites for Beginners*. The first one is the experiential commonality, i.e., members share similar experiences in the Dolomites or express the desire to explore this territory. The second commonality is affinity, namely members have the same passion for travelling in the Dolomites or practicing different activities such as trekking, hiking and climbing. In this regard, members can have a higher or lower degree of connection to this identity leading to different levels of engagement with the group, creating, for example, the so called "super users", i.e., people that are more active overall.

The *Identity* section includes three additional themes that represent the outer layer of the onion: the theme *Values* refers to the shared principles through which the members of a community are able to connect with one another. The authors underline how members of a community can interact best when they share the same values. In the case of *Dolomites for Beginners*, some key values played a crucial role in the creation of the group, i.e., relaxation, discovery and contact with nature. However, these principles were never explicitly communicated to the members even though they underlie the shared content. Another theme, namely *Success Definition*, can be measured in the context of the group through the levels of trust and engagement shown by members. On the one hand, members trust each other as they rely on information given by fellow users in their decision-making and planning process. On the other, engagement refers to how actively members engage with the content and answer to other members. The last aspect of Identity is the *Brand*, which is the visible manifestation of the community. In the case of *Dolomites for Beginners,* this primarily refers to language and storytelling. The language adopted by the community is relatively informal, while important announcements come directly from the admin, who always signs messages as "your admin". Storytelling,

meaning how the community's brand shapes the content created by the community, is still in its early stages.

The second section of the Community Canvas is *Experience*, which analyses the community from the perspective of its members, focusing on its internal dynamics and how its purpose actually translates into its daily activity. The first theme, *Member Selection,* concerns both entry and exit of users. *Dolomites for Beginners* was designed as an open community since its creation in order to include every mountain enthusiast approaching this Facebook group as a source of information. Each new member receives an explicit welcome in the community when joining: each Monday an automated welcome post lists all the new members who joined the community in the previous week. This is shown in Figure 18, where usernames have been blurred for privacy reasons.
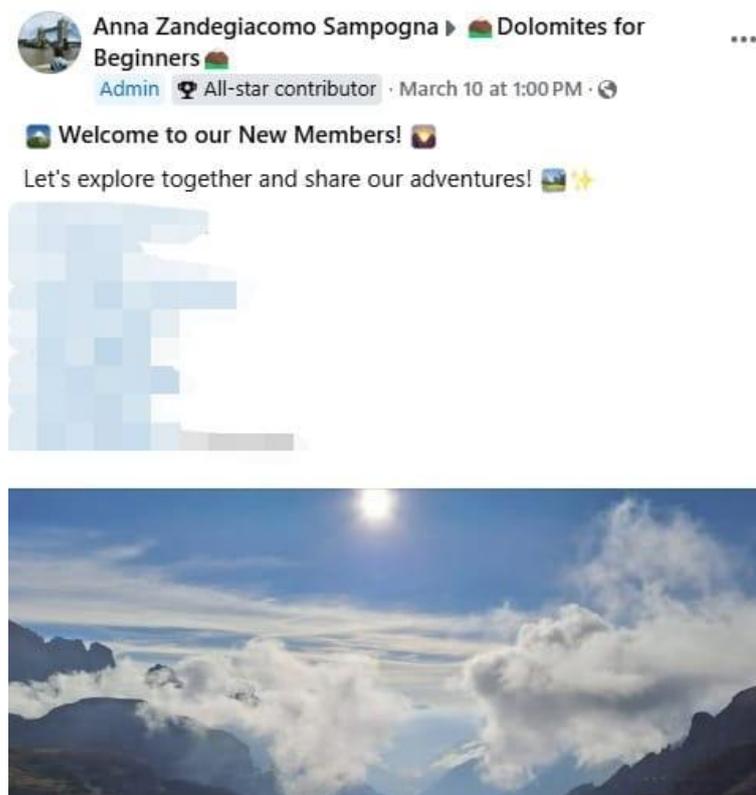
Figure 18: Example of Welcome Post. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [March 10, 2025]

Additionally, the group is characterised by inbound identification, meaning that potential members actively seek out the community and join autonomously. In fact, the

admin does not personally search and identify potential members. Membership in *Dolomites for Beginners* does not have a predefined exit point. However, inactive members can be easily identified and removed through Facebook settings. Another theme is *Shared Experiences*, which are considered the most important factor from the perspective of the members because it relates to how users interact and, in this way, increase trust in one another.

In *Dolomites for Beginners*, shared experiences are organised by the admin, who promotes popular events within the group, encouraging members to visit specific destinations in specific time periods. Examples are advertisements of organised walks in nature or visits to local Christmas markets. However, experiences organised directly by the members, i.e., following a bottom-up and not a top-down logic as in the previous examples, tend to be more effective in engaging members. A common example is how many members decide to partake in similar activities or trails thanks to their peers' recommendations. In both cases, consistency in sharing these experiences is important to foster trust and interaction. Another important factor in the Experience section is *Rituals*. In contrast with Shared Experiences, Rituals hold a symbolic value and are employed to strengthen members' sense of belonging to the community. *Dolomites for Beginners* has always employed a specific ritual to celebrate important milestones in the group's growth. In fact, a dedicated post is shared by the admin when a significant number of members is reached by the group. An example of this ritual is provided in Figure 19.

Figure 19: Example of Milestone Post. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [September 25, 2024]

Usually these posts have a specific structure, as shown in Figure 19: a message is included where the admin expresses her gratitude for the milestone and is accompanied by an image of a randomly chosen location in the Dolomites where a "thank you" and the updated number of members are superimposed. In some cases, ritual posts are dedicated to specific anniversaries, such as the day of creation of the group, or even important festivities, such as Christmas or New Year.

Continuing the analysis of the Experience section, it can be argued that a community generates a significant amount of *Content*, which constitutes another theme of the Community Canvas. This theme is particularly important because content plays a

crucial role in shaping members' experience and fostering cohesion around a shared topic. In *Dolomites for Beginners* content creates several values: on the one hand, it fosters inspiration, namely members feel inspired by their peers to travel to a certain destination; on the other, it facilitates learning, allowing members to learn from the experiences and best practices shared by others.

Another theme, *Membership Rules*, relates to the rules established in the community in order to ensure smooth interactions and effectively guide the experience of members. In this regard, members are expected to follow a specific etiquette and to be held accountable if they do not comply with the rules. *Dolomites for Beginners* is based on three main rules (see Figure 20), which are displayed to every member and also pinned in the main page of the group's feed.
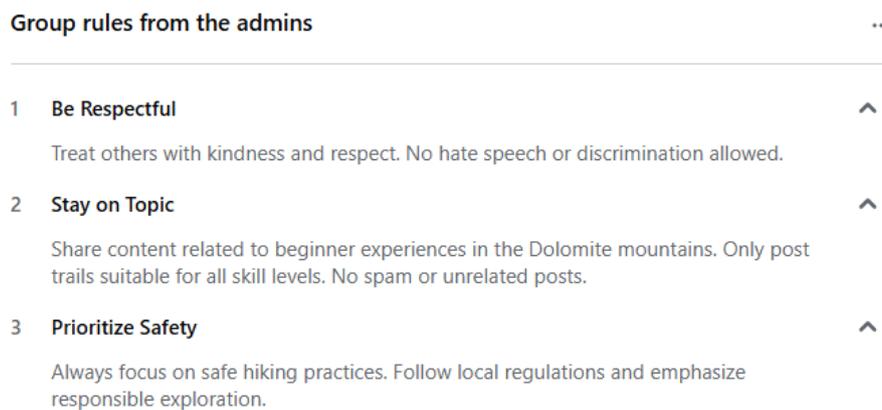
Figure 20: Group Rules. Source: Facebook, Dolomites for Beginners

As it can be noted in Figure 20, the first rule is linked to the behaviour every member has to show: each member has to treat others with kindness and respect. In this sense, no hate speech or discrimination are allowed. The second one relates to the content: members are allowed to share only content related to beginner experiences in the Dolomites, while also discouraging the sharing of spam. The last one concerns safety: members need to always focus on safe hiking practices, promoting the respect of local regulations while also emphasizing the need for a responsible exploration of the mountains. As previously mentioned, this theme is also connected to accountability, i.e., the consequences that arise if members violate the rules. In these cases, the admin gives a general warning reminding members of the correct behaviour and, if rules are still

disattended, the admin proceeds with banning the non-compliant members from the group.

An example of this can be found in Figure 21. In this particular case, inappropriate comments were posted below a photo shared by a member. After reviewing several reports from other members, the admin proceeded by deleting all comments and issuing a warning to all members. This measure was taken to prevent similar accidents from happening in the future and reinforce the importance of respecting the rules of the community. This message is still pinned in the upper part of the group's feed in order to be visible to new members.

Figure 21: Example of Accountability. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [July 4, 2024]

The following theme is *Membership Roles,* which refers to the possibility for a member to change their role in the community. However, *Dolomites for Beginners* has not yet established a clear set of specific duties and roles for its members.

The third section of the Community Canvas is called *Structure*, which analyses the organisational elements that are essential for running a community. These aspects are particularly important to ensure the long-term growth and stability of the community. Moreover, awareness of these aspects is crucial when dealing with challenging situations as it allows to address problems by knowing the structure on which the community is based. The first theme is *Organisation*, which addresses questions connected to structural and managerial aspects. This applies only partially to *Dolomites for Beginners* since all managerial activities are carried out by the admin, who does not receive support from staff, volunteers or legal entities. This central role of the admin has consequences on

another theme, i.e., *Governance*. In fact, decision-making power is concentrated in one entity, namely the admin, and occasionally the second admin, who are also responsible for conflict resolution. Therefore, Governance is based on birthright, meaning that authority comes from being the founder of the community.

The next theme, i.e., *Financing,* cannot be applied to *Dolomites for Beginners* because the community does not yet receive membership fees, sponsorships or external funding. Regarding the theme *Channels and Platforms*, the Community Canvas Framework highlights how it is important to first build the community and only later choose a platform where members can interact. However, in the case of *Dolomites for Beginners*, the platform, i.e., Facebook, was chosen from the start as a medium to gather individuals who are passionate about the Dolomites. This choice aligns with another suggestion given by the authors of the Canvas, who argue that leveraging an already-existing platform results in more active and lively groups than creating a brand-new one.

Furthermore, they underline that, while technology is important, maintaining consistency in its use is more crucial to ensure reliable communication in the community; this aspect of consistency was also a requirement in the theme *Shared Experiences.* Choosing Facebook as the main platform for *Dolomites for Beginners* has also proved effective because it allows to capture insights, which is a key aspect of the last theme, *Data Management*. In fact, all information and knowledge shared by members remain available to all future members that will rely on it for their future trips and vacations.

4. **Competitor Analysis of Other Facebook Groups**

This chapter provides an analysis of the competitors of the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*, namely Facebook groups that focus on similar topics. After an introductory section (4.1) providing a general description of the characteristics of a competitor analysis, the chapter is structured in two more parts. The first part analyses the competitors of *Dolomites for Beginners* in more general terms, such as number of members, content, and engagement. Proper comparison with the case study will be carried out. In this sense, this first section will be important to understand how the group positions itself among other similar ones. Additionally, this first analysis of selected groups will be important in understanding the impacts of their strategies for the future of *Dolomites for Beginners*. In contrast, the second part will consider the best practices of the selected groups in order to understand which ones have already been adopted by the group and which ones still need to be implemented. Some practical examples will be provided.

4.1. Competitor Analysis

Competitor analysis has been defined by various scholars. According to Hatzijordanou at al. (2019, p.419), it is the "process embodying the collection of data on rivals as well as their analysis and interpretation for managerial decision-making". Simkin and Cheng (1997), as cited by Bennett (2003), argue that this process leads to gathering data on competitors' objectives, strategies, strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, Fletcher and Donaghy (1994), also cited by Bennett (2003), emphasise that the acquired data has to be organised into a well-structured system. Bennett (2003) further explains that conducting a competitor analysis can be beneficial to an organisation for several reasons. Firstly, it improves the awareness of both its internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as its external opportunities and threats. Additionally, it can be valuable in the process of finding new ideas to solve problems by understanding how other organisations have addressed similar issues. Lastly, it can drive innovation within an organisation. However, the possible disadvantages are represented mostly by the time, money and energy required in the process of effectively carrying out such an analysis.

Considering the benefits associated with this type of analysis, this study will now use the framework of the competitor analysis to describe and examine the environment where *Dolomites for Beginners* operates. The analysis will first focus on the characteristics of competing groups and then on the best practices they have adopted. This will help determine whether and how these practices can be implemented in the Facebook group at the centre of this research.

4.2. General Analysis and Comparison with Competitors

The Facebook groups included in this competitor analysis were selected based on their content and thematic similarities with the group *Dolomites for Beginners*. In order to give structure to the analysis, the selected groups have been divided into three different categories according to their main theme. The first category consists of groups that focus mainly on the Dolomites, since this is the primary theme of the case study. The second category is represented by groups dedicated to the mountains in general, covering mountain destinations all over the world. The third category includes groups that connect users interested in travelling in Italy with no further specificity about the geographical focus. It is evident from this categorisation that the analysis uses a structured approach, starting from a narrow theme, namely the Dolomites, and gradually expanding the focus to groups related to global mountain destinations and finally extending it to more general travel in Italy, which is not limited to mountainous locations.

Table 1 and Table 2 present a breakdown of the analysis, organising the gathered data into four different sections. The first section, namely *General Information*, contains the number of members each group counts and the primary language used by their members. The second section, i.e., *Engagement & Content*, lists the posting frequency (daily, monthly or less frequent), the most popular content types (e.g., photos, videos, blogs) and the overall level of members' engagement in terms of likes, comments and shares (high, medium, low or very low). The third one, namely *Moderation*, assesses the presence of rules and whether positive behaviour by members is actively encouraged. The last section, *Monetization*, determines if the group features sponsored content. Additionally, the tables maintain the division of groups into three thematic categories, which are sorted from largest to smallest based on their number of members.

	General Information			Engagement & Content		Moderation		Monetization
	Number of Members	Language	Frequency	Popular Content Types	General Engagement	Rules	Positive Behaviour	Sponsored Content
Dolomites								
Dolomiti…Che Passione	272.600	Italian	Daily	Photos, Videos	Medium	Strict	Encouraged	
DoloMitici!	269.000	Italian	Daily	Photos, Videos	High	Strict	Encouraged	
Dolomites – Hiking and Trekking	160.400	English	Daily	Photos, Textual Posts	Low	Strict	Encouraged	
Dolomites. Via Ferrata, Hiking, Trekking, Van Life	44.300	Italian	Daily	Photos, Textual Posts	Medium	Strict		
Le dolomiti…le nostre montagne	34.800	Italian	Daily	Photos, Videos	Low	Some guidelines		
Dolomiti da sogno	18.500	Italian	Last Post in December 2024	Photos	Very Low	Present but general		
Escursioni nelle Dolomiti	15.000	Italian	Daily	Photos, Links	Very Low	No clear rules		Hotels/ Apartments
Amici delle Dolomiti	12.000	Italian	Daily	Photos, Videos of hotels	Very Low	Strict		Hotels
Alps / Dolomites / Landscapes	3.500	English, Italian, French	Daily	Photos, Videos	Very Low	Present but in Russian		

Table 1: Competitor Analysis Part 1. (Source: Internal Representation)

	General Information				Engagement & Content		Moderation			Monetization
	Number of Members	Language	Frequency	Popular Content Types	General Engagement	Rules	Positive Behaviour	Sponsored Content
Mountains									
Beautiful Mountains	621.200	English	Daily	Photos of destinations	High	Strict		
World of Mountains	110.300	English	Daily	Photos, Videos	Medium	Strict		
Hiking, Adventure, Trekking, Mountain & Lakes	95.400	English	Daily	Photos, Videos	Vey Low	Strict	Encouraged	Tours
Noi che amiamo le montagne	62.900	Italian	Daily	Photos, Videos	Low	Strict		
Mountain life	22.800	English	Monthly	Photos of destinations	Low	No clear rules		
Travel in Italy									
Discover Italy | Best Places and Travel Tips	861.000	Italian	Daily	Photos, Videos	Medium	Strict		Hotels, Tours
We Travel Italy – Tips, Guides, Itineraries & Destinations	68.800	English	Daily	Photos, Textual Posts	High	Strict		
Vacanze Italiane, Italy Holidays, Italien Urlaub	36.200	Italian, English, German	Daily	Photos, Videos	Low	No clear rules		Hotels, B&Bs
Italy Experience. Your Holidays in Italy	2.300	Italian	Daily	Photos, Videos	Very Low	Strict		Restaurants, B&Bs

Table 2: Competitor Analysis Part 2. (Source: Internal Representation)

Considering both tables, it is evident that the selected groups differ a lot in terms of size, ranging from more than 800.000 to only 2.300 members. Regarding this, *Dolomites for Beginners* positions itself among the biggest groups, although some of them have a substantially larger number of members. In terms of language, groups focused on the Dolomites prefer employing Italian, while those related to global mountain destinations and travel in Italy usually utilise English. This is mostly due to the different target of these categories: while the Dolomite-focused ones mainly cater to Italian tourists exploring their own country, the other two categories connect international tourists travelling to mountains located all over the world or visiting Italy as foreigners.

Considering the limit posed by the use of the Italian language by Dolomite-dedicated groups, *Dolomites for Beginners* holds a very important competitive advantage. In fact, using English as its official language proves beneficial for the group since it can cater to all those non-Italian speakers that cannot rely on the information provided by other groups due to the language barrier.

A notable mention has to be made regarding two groups: *Alps / Dolomites / Landscapes* and *Vacanze Italiane, Italy Holidays, Italien Urlaub* employ not only English and Italian but, respectively, French and German. This shows that the use of three different languages in the same group is feasible, particularly thanks to Facebook's automatic translation feature. This feature has already been utilized in *Dolomites for Beginners*. In fact, the admin usually accepts the sharing of posts in other languages in order to enable all users to actively communicate in the group.

A first commonality among most groups in all three categories is their frequency of posting: almost the totality of the groups post daily, a characteristic shared also by *Dolomites for Beginners*. Some similarities can be observed in the section dedicated to the most popular types of content shared on the different groups. All groups employ photos to attract users and many also utilize videos. This aligns perfectly with the theory on Facebook engagement provided in the previous chapter: members usually prefer posting images and videos, rather than textual posts, as stated by Hanifawati et al. (2019). However, textual posts remain relevant in many groups in all three categories, particularly when members request assistance or ask questions, which are usually answered by their peers in a textual post. This is coherent with the use of different types of content according

to the aim of the post, which was described in relation to *Dolomites for Beginners* in the previous chapter.

Considering general member engagement, no clear correlation appears when comparing this element with popular types of content: sharing videos, which are generally preferred by users, does not necessarily translate into an overall higher degree of engagement. An example of this is represented by the group *Le dolomiti...le nostre montagne*, which shares both photos and videos but still records a low level of overall engagement. However, a direct relationship can be observed when member engagement is considered in relation to group size: it is evident that engagement is higher in groups that count a higher number of members. For example, the group *Beautiful Mountains* counts more than 600.000 members and it achieves high levels of engagement, with some posts reaching periodically more than one thousand likes. In this sense, the competitor analysis is essential in showing that engagement in the selected groups does not depend on the type of content shared by admins and members but it seems to have a more direct relationship with the size of the groups.

The groups with a higher number of members are also characterised by the presence of stricter rules when compared with smaller groups. This can suggest that the presence of rules is considered essential by administrators of bigger groups in order to maintain effective and respectful communication among their members. Moreover, admins of these bigger groups with strict rules tend to reinforce their guidelines periodically: positive behaviour, as shown in the tables, is encouraged in periodic posts describing the correct conduct members have to show in their interactions.

Even though *Dolomites for Beginners* counts fewer members than these large groups, rules remain a priority for the admins: regularly reinforcing the correct member behaviour is a key responsibility of the admins. In regards to the relation between rules and general engagement, a pattern seems to appear: groups with fewer or no rules at all are the ones with the lowest general engagement. This further emphasises the importance of establishing and reinforcing rules to foster engagement by members.

Finally, the Monetization section shows that posts containing sponsored content appear in only a few groups. It can be noticed that this type of content is typically allowed in those groups that are owned by external stakeholders such as the groups *Amici delle*

Dolomiti and *Vacanze Italiane, Italy Holidays, Italien Urlaub,* both managed by the *Corriere Turismo*, an organisation promoting travel and vacation all over Italy. In these cases, sponsored content mostly advertises services and locations related to accommodation and dining establishments such as hotels, B&Bs and restaurants, which are usually showcased through the employment of videos. However, when groups make use of sponsored content, engagement is often affected. In fact, it can be observed that groups with sponsorships tend to experience medium or low levels of engagement, meaning that members are less likely to like, share or comment on these shared posts. By looking at the table, it could be initially assumed that these groups have lower engagement simply due to their reduced size in terms of members but an example can be used to avoid making this false claim.

The group *Hiking, Adventure, Trekking, Mountain & Lakes,* belonging to the groups related to mountains in general, counts more than 95.000 members. The previous analysis has shown that groups with a bigger size usually have a higher level of engagement. However, despite its larger size, the engagement levels of this specific group are very low, with most posts receiving little to no interaction from members. This lack of engagement can be attributed to the only variable that has changed, namely the frequent promotion of sponsored content, even though the group itself is not owned by an external organisation. This low engagement in sponsored posts may be due to the fact that members perceive the content as not authentic, since it is not shared by their peers but rather by an external organisation. In this sense, the lack of authenticity often leads to a decreased interaction among members.

To summarise this first part of the competitor analysis, *Dolomites for Beginners* already presents some advantages compared to other similar Facebook groups. First of all, the group plays an important role in filling a gap in the existing groups in terms of language use. While groups with a broader focus on global mountain destinations and travel all over Italy mainly use English as the language of communication, groups dedicated to the Dolomites predominantly use Italian. In this sense, *Dolomites for Beginners* can potentially become an important resource for international tourists who seek more detailed and specific information on the Dolomites and want to avoid relying on groups with too general information. Moreover, enabling members to write posts in their own language, which is then translated directly by Facebook, gives the group a very

important advantage because it can cater even to individuals who struggle communicating in English.

Additionally, *Dolomites for Beginners* already shares posts daily, positioning itself perfectly among other similar groups. However, compared to other communities, the group employs all post types. In fact, Chapter 3 underlined how members prefer certain types of posts, such as blogs, videos and photos, but this preference does not equal to completely excluding more textual posts. Like the largest groups in the list, *Dolomites for Beginners* is characterised by a high engagement and the presence and periodic reinforcement of strict rules. In this sense, there is a perfect alignment of the case study with the other groups.

However, the competitor analysis highlights some important aspects that should be considered when planning the future of *Dolomites for Beginners*. In fact, the analysis has underlined how groups containing sponsored content tend to experience lower general engagement, even if they have a large following in terms of number of members. This needs to be taken into consideration when deciding whether to introduce sponsored content in *Dolomites for Beginners* in the future.

The analysis of competitors is crucial in making this decision and determining the best approach to sponsorships. In fact, if sponsored content were shared in the group, careful adjustments would need to be made to ensure that the content does not lose authenticity and is perceived as reliable by members. In this way, the competitor analysis plays a crucial role in understanding the behaviour of similar groups and learning from their mistakes to introduce a better strategy for *Dolomites for Beginners*.

The next section will delve deeper into this, taking into consideration not only sponsored content and the potential for monetising the group but also all the best practices that other similar groups employ and that could be potentially adopted by the group as well.

4.3. Best Practices of Competitors and Future Implications

This section outlines the best practices adopted by the selected groups in order to assess which of them can be adopted by the group *Dolomites for Beginners*.

Best Practices

	Sharing Itineraries	Local Recommendations	Sustainable Practices	Sharing Safety Tips
Dolomites				
Dolomiti...che Passione	Only destinations			Weather Conditions upon Request
DoloMitici!	Destinations and some trails	Local Events	Accessibility	Alpine Rescue, Weather Reports
Dolomites - Hiking and Trekking	Only destinations	Online Events on Wellness		
Dolomites. Via Ferrata, Hiking, Trekking, Van Life	Only destinations	Local produce		
Le dolomiti...le nostre montagne	Only destinations			Alpine Rescue, Weather Reports
Dolomiti da sogno	Only destinations	Local Events	Trail cleaning	Weather Reports
Escursioni nelle Dolomiti	Links to Blogs	Local Activities		
Amici delle Dolomiti		Hotels, Chalets		
Alps / Dolomites / Landscapes	Only destinations			
Mountains				
Beautiful Mountains	Only destinations			
World of Mountains	Trekking recommendations			
Hiking, Adventure, Trekking, Mountain & Lakes	Advertisement on trekking tours			
Noi che amiamo le montagne	Some trekking recommendations			
Mountain life	Only destinations			
Travel in Italy				
**Discover Italy	Best Places and Travel Tips**	Tours	Virtual Tours		
We Travel Italy - Tips, Guides, Itineraries & Destinations	Advice on attractions			Weather Conditions upon Request
Vacanze Italiane, Italy Holidays, Italien Urlaub		Hotels, B&Bs		
Italy Experience. Your Holidays in Italy	Blogs	Local Events		

Table 3: Best Practices (Source: Internal Representation)

Table 3 shows a breakdown of the best practices of the selected groups, which were already considered in the more general part of this competitor analysis in the previous subchapter. Their categorization into three parts remains. However, the focus of this analysis is on four different best practices that are considered relevant for the case study.

The first practice, *Sharing Itineraries*, refers to the habit of groups to share posts containing practical advice on itineraries suggested to the members. Regarding this practice, most groups, especially those dedicated to the Dolomites, usually prefer to share suggestions on specific destinations, often accompanied by pictures, while they tend to avoid the publication of more detailed and comprehensive itineraries. In some cases, groups post more accurate descriptions of itineraries but these are usually connected to a commercial operation. In fact, these itineraries often appear in advertisements for tours offered by external organisations, which may either own the group, as mentioned previously, or use it to reach potential customers. Only in rare cases members share posts with links to blogs providing guidance in itineraries. Comparing these practices with the case study, it can be argued that *Dolomites for Beginners* is already in a favourable position. In fact, the group regularly shares itineraries, both in the form of suggestions posted by the admin and posts shared by members.

The second section refers to the presence of *Local Recommendations* in the posts shared by the groups. These posts may include various types of recommendations. Some groups, as already mentioned, contain suggestions on hotels, restaurants and B&Bs: often these posts are included in a commercial operation by the owner or other members. However, these recommendations can also be provided by admin or members without any underlying monetization purpose. For example, the admin of the group *Dolomiti da Sogno* frequently promotes local events, allowing members to be informed about them and participate.

An example of this last case is shown in Figure 22, which features a post promoting an astronomy night with an astrophotographer and local guides. This event will take participants to see the stars at the Sass Pordoi, a peak in the Dolomites located in the Trento province. In this case, the initiative is organised by the Facebook group itself

and booking is available exclusively through their webpage, although this event is completely free of charge.

Figure 22: Best Practice 1. Source: Facebook [Dolomiti da Sogno], [June 24, 2024]

However, groups can promote events even when they are not organised directly by them. Figure 23 shows a post from the Facebook group *Escursioni nelle Dolomiti* where an external organisation promotes a snowshoeing tour in Venegia Valley, located in the Trento province.

Figure 23: Best Practice 2. Source: Facebook [Escursioni delle Dolomiti, Gruppo Amici di Montagna], [March 22, 2025]

Additionally, local recommendations can also be less structured. The admin or the members of a group can simply share their own experiences and, in this way, promote local events, activities or products. This is the case portrayed by Figure 24, where the admin of the group *Dolomites. Via Ferrata, Hiking, Trekking, Vanlife* shares a personal experience, describing how they were able to taste and purchase local products while travelling through Trentino-Alto Adige. This type of content functions as a local recommendation since other members may feel encouraged to try the same products based on the suggestion of their peers.

Figure 24: Best Practice 3. Source: Facebook [Dolomites. Via Ferrata, Hiking, Trekking, Vanlife], [March 12, 2025]

This last type of local recommendations can be considered more relevant than the previous ones as they directly affect the economy of many territories. In fact, more individuals can become aware of products they can purchase while exploring the Dolomites: this can be really beneficial for many local stakeholders. Comparing these types of local recommendations with the posts already shared by *Dolomites for Beginners*, it can be argued that the group is still lacking on this best practice. In fact, the group is mainly focused on sharing destinations or providing suggestions upon request

but local events, activities and products are only seldom promoted. Some examples could be advertising the opening of the Christmas markets or promoting participation in a guided moonlight walk.

The third best practice refers to the dissemination of *Sustainable Practices* within the groups. Analysing the data, it can be stated that sustainable practices are not as widespread as other best practices. Figure 25 and Figure 26 illustrate how sustainability is incorporated into the few Facebook groups where it is present. Figure 25 shows how Facebook groups can be instrumental in quickly spreading important information. In fact, this figure features a post from the group *DoloMitici!*, where the admin provides updated information regarding road accessibility in the Veneto region after a snowstorm. The post advises users to be cautious since many roads across the region are covered in snow, resulting in potential viability issues. He also informs members that snow-clearing vehicles are already working to address this issue. However, users still need to be careful on high-altitude roads, which are the most affected by the snow accumulation.

Figure 25: Best Practice 4. Source: Facebook [DoloMitici!], [January 7, 2025]

Figure 26 features a post from a member of the group *Dolomiti da sogno*, where participation in a different type of sustainable initiative is encouraged. This sustainable initiative involves a trail cleaning activity: the member uses the post in this group to reach a broader audience that may potentially be interested in participating. In this post the member provides more detailed information about the activity, such as the organisation coordinating this activity, the location and the booking procedure.

Figure 26: Best Practice 5. Source: Facebook [Dolomiti da sogno], [August 21, 2024]

Both figures highlight how sustainable practices, in terms of both accessibility and respect of the environment, can be effectively promoted within Facebook groups. However, admins and members of these Facebook communities should better leverage the potential of this platform to raise awareness about sustainability among the wider public. In comparison with *Dolomites for Beginners*, it is evident that the group has yet to seize the opportunity to act as a tool for promoting sustainability in the Dolomitic territory.

The fourth practice refers to the publication of posts that share *Safety Tips*. This type of content is relevant since Facebook groups can play a crucial role in raising awareness about the unique characteristics of the territory of the Dolomites. In fact, this region is very fragile, subject to quick weather changes and connected dangers. Figure 27 features a post from the group *DoloMitici!* where the admin provides weather reports for both the Veneto and Trentino-Alto Adige region. These reports inform users not only about the weather forecast but also about the risks in terms of avalanches resulting from snow accumulation in these areas.
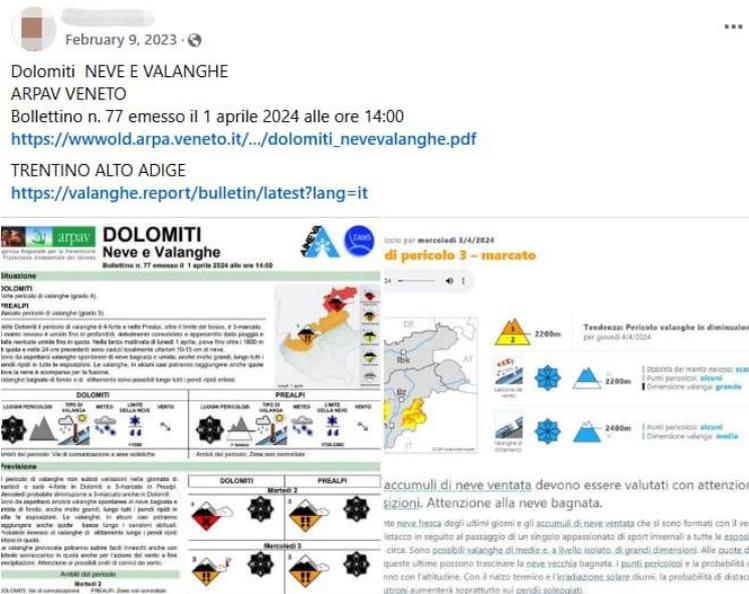
Figure 27: Best Practice 6. Source: Facebook [DoloMitici!], [February 9, 2023]

However, safety tips extend beyond simple weather reports to include information from official sources that is shared within these groups. Figure 28 features a post by a member of the group *Le dolomiti … le nostre montagne* where they share a post from the CNSAS – Corpo Nazionale Soccorso Alpino e Speleologico (National Alpine and Speleological Rescue Service). The CNSAS is a non-political and non-profit voluntary organisation, whose task is to contribute to the prevention of accidents and recovery of injured individuals across Italy, particularly in mountainous areas, underground environments and other impervious areas (CNSAS, n.d.).

The Corps uses Facebook as a platform to spread important safety information. In this case, the CNSAS post reports that many avalanches have taken place in the Alps causing casualties and injuries. Consequently, they urge mountain enthusiasts to be cautious when exploring the Alps and, most importantly, to check weather and avalanche reports before embarking on a trip. Additionally, they stress the necessity of carrying with them all the essential safety equipment, which could prove lifesaving in dangerous situations. A member of this group found this post particularly meaningful and decided to share it, extending its reach to a wider audience.

Figure 28: Best Practice 7. Source: Facebook [Le dolomiti …. Le nostre montagne], [March 19, 2025]

Comparing this best practice with *Dolomites for Beginners,* it can be argued that safety tips are implemented within the group but they are not presented in an effective and meaningful way. For example, the posts initially shared by the admin contained advice in terms of the necessary equipment for undertaking journeys on suggested trails or towards specific destinations. Additionally, members often share safety tips in response to specific requests from their peers. An example of this is provided by Figure 29, where a member asks about the most adequate footwear to travel to the Dolomites in the summer.

This post received 24 comments where other members provided helpful insights to fulfil the request of their peer.
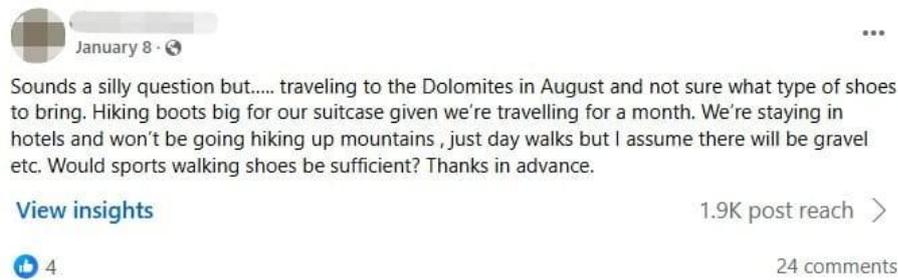
Figure 29: Best Practice 8. Source: Facebook [Dolomites for Beginners], [January 8, 2025]

To summarise this section, considering all the best practices observed in the selected groups, it can be concluded that *Dolomites for Beginners* presents both strengths and weaknesses. In terms of the practice of *Sharing Itineraries*, the group is effective in providing this type of content. However, a closer analysis at the other practices reveals several weaknesses. Specifically, the group is still lacking in the practice of sharing *Local Recommendations*. However, this practice should be incorporated since it would not only be beneficial to the members of the group, who could enhance their experience in the Dolomites, but it could also positively impact the economy of several Dolomitic valleys. The first step in this direction could be the promotion of events organised by other local organisations. Regarding *Sustainable Practices*, it is evident that even more established groups struggle to effectively introduce them to their own content.

This practice is too often reduced to sharing accessibility information and minor environmentally friendly events. To address this, all groups should focus more on educating members about sustainability and connected initiatives. In terms of *Sharing Safety Tips*, which are closely tied to sustainability, it can be argued that *Dolomites for Beginners* could draw inspiration from other groups. The group could begin by sharing weather and avalanche reports issued by external official organisations, such as the CNSAS. This task could be handled by the admin, who might also provide more detailed information on hiking gear and necessary equipment.

The practical implications of this analysis and the best practices discussed will be the subject of the next chapters, which will focus on practical strategies that the group could implement in the future.

5. Strategies to Implement within the Facebook Group "Dolomites for Beginners"

After the comparative analysis of the case study in relation to its potential competitors focusing on their best practices, this chapter provides a description of the strategies that can and will be implemented within the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*. These strategies divide the chapter into three different sections according to the type of posts that will be shared in order to transform this Facebook community into a tool to effectively mitigate overtourism in the Dolomites.

Each strategy is presented by practical examples of posts, which will be based on the theory provided at the beginning of each section. These posts will be shared in the group and then copied in this chapter to provide a visual representation of them, followed by an explanation of their consistency with the corresponding theory.

Section 5.1 focuses on responsible tourism, providing a theoretical background on its main principles and effects followed by practical examples of posts. Section 5.2 focuses on alternative tourism, providing insights on how to effectively introduce posts promoting alternative destinations in the Dolomites. Section 5.3 concentrates on how to spread knowledge on mountain safety among the members through tailored content.

The introduction of this particular content in the group aims at raising awareness among the members on different practices they can adopt to discover the Dolomites while being respectful of the environment and communities.

5.1. Posts Educating on Responsible Tourism

This section provides an overview of responsible tourism with a set of examples that shows how responsible tourism can be effectively implemented in the group through the publication of specific posts.

According to Silva et al. (2021), responsible tourism involves creating better locations for people to visit and choose to inhabit. The main principles of responsible tourism were outlined in 2002 at the International Conference on Responsible Tourism in

Destinations held in Cape Town. The Cape Town Declaration, drafted as a result of this conference, asserts that responsible tourism should minimise the negative economic, environmental, and social impacts of tourism while maximising its positive effects, such as contributing to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage (International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, 2002).

Responsible tourism is believed to have positive effects on both local communities and tourists. On the one hand, it aims at involving host communities in tourism-related decisions in order to enhance their living and working conditions. On the other, it leads to the creation of more enjoyable experiences for visitors, also through the establishment of more authentic connections with the aforementioned local people. In this regard, it aims at creating a more balanced relationship between guests and hosts, fostering a deeper mutual respect between these two actors (ibid.). Unfortunately, implementing responsible tourism in destinations proves challenging due to the lack of education of various actors, primarily tourists themselves.

Tourists' lack of awareness is a common phenomenon in several destinations (Tiwari et al, 2020). This ignorance usually results in damage to the cultural and natural heritage while creating frictions between visitors and local communities (ibid.). Tiwari et al. (ibid.) underline how each stage of the travel, i.e., pre-trip, during the trip and post-trip, can be instrumental in solving these issues and educating tourists on how to correctly behave in a destination. Already in 1987, Krippendorf proposed to focus on the pre-trip stage as a means to educate tourists. According to him, this would have resulted in a more ethical form of tourism in destinations (ibid.). Since social media play a crucial role in the collection of information and in the decision-making process of tourists during the pre-trip stage, these platforms could be used even to educate tourists on responsible tourism before their arrival at the destination. This education could include all aspects of the destination such as local culture and respect of nature.

This type of content based on education of visitors on responsible tourism can be implemented in the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*. In fact, even the Dolomites suffer from the lack of tourists' education. Ferrari & Iaffaldano (2021) state that natural protected areas, such as the Dolomites, are not threatened only by the large number of tourists they attract but mostly by the incorrect behaviour shown by many of them. An

important official publication that can be leveraged to effectively introduce insights on responsible tourism in the group and educate its members is represented by the leaflet *The Responsible Tourist and Traveller*. This document was prepared in 2005 and then revised in 2020 by the World Committee on Tourism and Ethics in order to facilitate the understanding of the principles contained in the *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* (World Tourism Organization, n.d.-b). The *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* entails a set of key principles that provide guidance to the many stakeholders involved in tourism development.

This Code was adopted in 1999 in order to maximise the benefits granted by the tourism sector while minimising its negative impacts on environment, heritage and society (World Tourism Organization, n.d.-a). As this leaflet employs simple and concise language, its principles offer a useful theoretical foundation for developing social media posts that advocate for a more responsible tourism in the Dolomites. While specific adaptations and additional content are necessary to tailor these principles to the specific context of the Dolomites, the information contained in this leaflet serves as a useful starting point for a communication based on scientific theory.

The first example of a post educating members of the group on responsible tourism is provided in Figure 30. This first post shows the structure chosen to implement education on responsible tourism in the Facebook group. In each post, an attention-grabbing phrase is used to attract the reader's attention, i.e., "Want to be a responsible tourist in the Dolomites but not sure where to start?", followed by a brief explanation of the purpose of this type of content. Subsequently, one or more principles contained in the leaflet *The Responsible Tourist and Traveller* are presented and accompanied by an explanation tailored to the specific case of the Dolomites. Additionally, the post includes images connected to the main topic of the post in order to attract the attention of the potential reader and enable a clearer understanding of the message contained in the post. In this manner, general worldwide guidelines can be applied to the specific case study of the Dolomites.
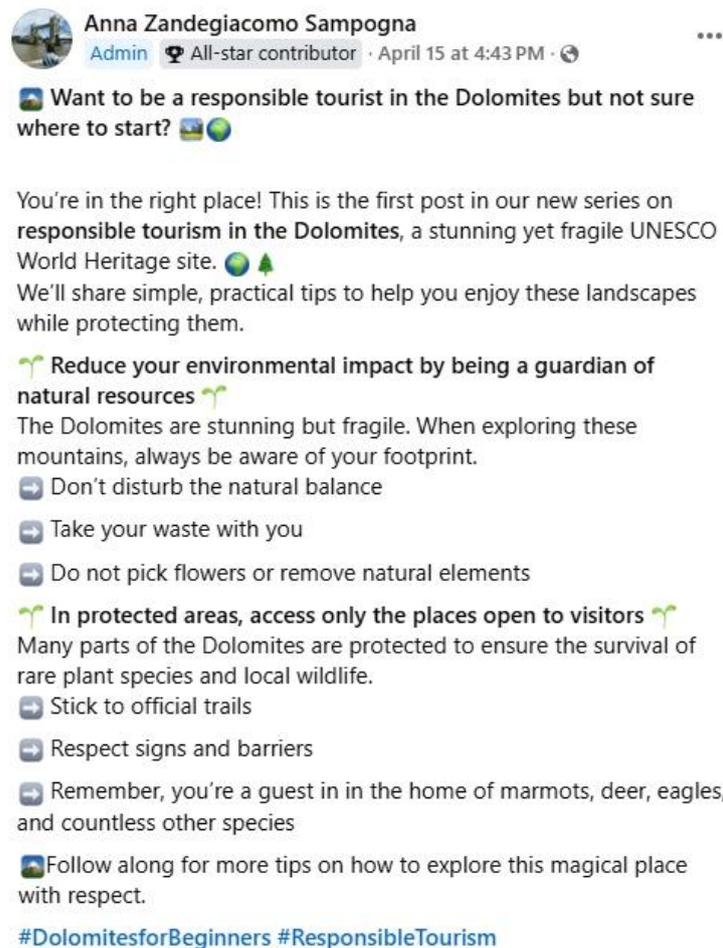
Figure 30: Post Responsible Tourism n.1. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [April 15, 2025]

The post illustrated in Figure 30 contains two principles that are connected to the respect of the environment, i.e., the reduction of the environmental impact of tourists and the safeguard of protected areas. This last principle is particularly important as the area of the Dolomites has been recognised in 2009 as part of the UNESCO World Heritage list, as already mentioned in previous chapters. Moreover, these principles align with the theory on responsible tourism as they explicitly advocate for the mitigation of the environmental impacts of tourism. In the post, these two principles are applied to the specific case of the Dolomites, providing practical suggestions on how to implement responsible behaviour while visiting the area.
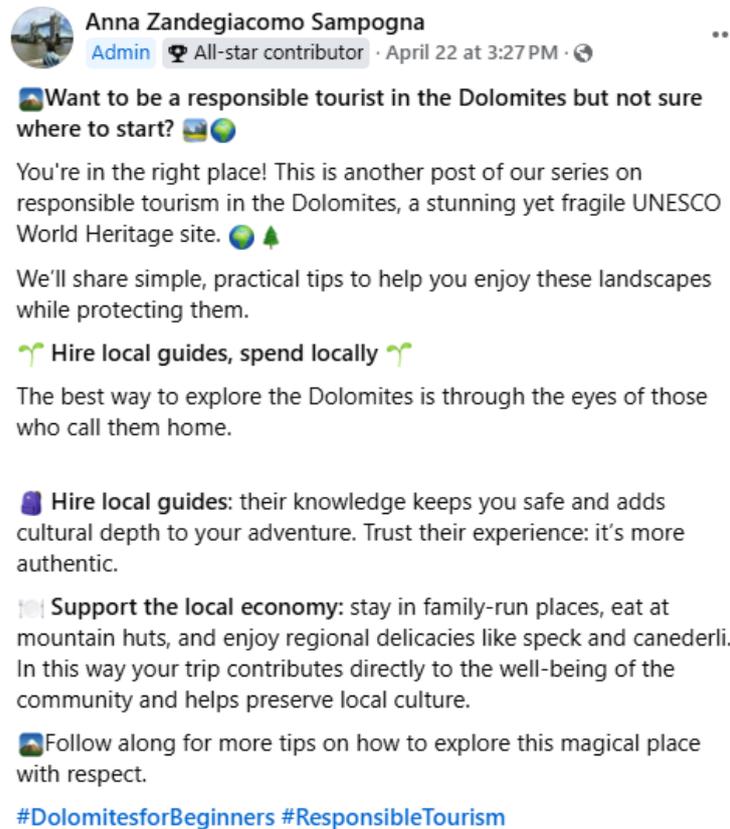
Figure 31: Post Responsible Tourism n.2. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [April 5, 2025

As already mentioned in this section, responsible tourism aims at protecting not only the environment but also the living and working conditions of local communities. Figure 31 features a post that focuses on this particular matter, employing the same structure of the post provided in the previous Figure. It features the principle of responsible tourism stating "Hire local guides, spend locally", which is aimed at encouraging members to employ local professionals as guides during their trips while emphasising the importance of purchasing local products. This type of behaviour can be perfectly applied to the case of the Dolomites.

On the one hand, hiring local guides allows tourists to safely explore the territory of the Dolomites while gaining a deeper understanding of its culture through the insights of local people. This is crucial in order to reach a responsible form of tourism: tourists are more likely to adopt a responsible behaviour if they are introduced to the local traditions and customs of a territory (Tiwari et al, 2020). On the other, visitors are encouraged to support the local economy by purchasing regional products and choosing local restaurants

and businesses. This post aligns perfectly with the principles of responsible tourism because it promotes a more authentic experience for visitors while also contributing to the sustainability of the local economy.

As previously mentioned, many tourists are not educated enough on various aspects of tourism, such as the culture of the destination they visit or the general behaviour they should adopt while away from home (Butler, 2020). However, providing tourists with a better education would only partially mitigate the issue of overtourism. In fact, overtourism can only be effectively mitigated if all stakeholders involved in the tourism sector are educated on this issue and on responsible tourism practices (ibid.). However, educating all tourism players appears challenging for several reasons. Firstly, the tourism industry primarily focuses on its own financial well-being, often overlooking the long-term negative effects of its actions on the territories where it operates. Secondly, the public sector experiences fragmentation in the goals related to tourism across different levels of the political structure. In fact, national level governments tend to promote tourism as a way to support economy without considering the negative effects of overtourism.

Conversely, local-level governments are more aware of the problems caused by an uncontrolled and unsustainable form of tourism, as they experience them firsthand. In this case, local governments are more likely to introduce measures to mitigate overtourism as they are more aware of the risks (ibid.). The need to address this discrepancy in political views is underlined also in the Cape Town Declaration on responsible tourism, which states that "the management of tourism requires the participation of a broad range of government agencies and particularly at the local destination level" (International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, 2002).

The Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners* can play a crucial role in facilitating a broader participation in tourism management at the local and even regional level. Although most of its members are tourists, the group also counts local stakeholders such as hotels and tour operators. The group could be employed to educate them on the issue of overtourism. A possible way to achieve this involves using the group as a platform to advertise events that aim at educating stakeholders on these matters, leading to a greater participation at both local and regional level.

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Figure 32 features the advertisement of the event "The Long Vision of Dino Buzzati: the Tre Cime di Lavaredo/Drei Zinnen besieged by cars" held at the Municipality of Auronzo di Cadore in March 2025.

This event was organised to involve both stakeholders and citizens in the discussion on how to address the issue of overtourism in the area of the Tre Cime/Drei Zinnen. In particular, citizens, businesses and other organisations were invited to offer their perspective on the issue of transportation to the Tre Cime/Drei Zinnen. In fact, there

is only one road to reach these peaks by car, as already mentioned in Chapter 1. All vehicles must pay a fee at a tool gate, which also limits the number of cars and buses that can park at the base of the Tre Cime/Drei Zinnen. Due to the great number of tourists that want to explore this area, the road experiences long queues of cars and buses. This leads to problems of traffic congestion and pollution in the area, which exacerbate the issue of overtourism. Key stakeholders were invited to discuss this issue, including the Mayor of Auronzo di Cadore, the Presidents of the CAI (Italian Alpine Club) of the Veneto and Alto Adige regions, along with other environmental associations. The event also attracted numerous owners of local businesses who recognised the need to participate and be educated on this issue.

This type of event represents an example of initiatives that could be advertised in the group *Dolomites for Beginners* in order to promote the participation of more stakeholders in the management of their own territory, leading to higher degrees of awareness among them.

5.2. Posts Promoting Seasonal and Lesser-known Destinations

This section provides an overview of alternative tourism with a set of examples that shows how *Dolomites for Beginners* can become a tool not only to educate members on responsible tourism but also to change the temporal and geographical distribution of tourism flows in the Dolomites. In fact, educating members on responsible tourism appears only as the first step towards the mitigation of overtourism in the Dolomites: visitors should be encouraged to explore lesser-known destinations or to travel outside the peak season in order to have a more balanced distribution of tourism flows.

Kozak and Bahçe (2012), as cited by Koba (2021), argue that the development of alternative tourism is the result of the convergence of several factors. One key factor is the reaction to the growing phenomenon of overtourism, which has led to increasing negative impacts on the environment and society but, at the same time, has intensified the environmental awareness among many individuals. As a result, these people have started exploring new forms of tourism, such as eco-tourism and nature-oriented tourism, which respect the environment and enable a more meaningful exploration of destinations.

Additionally, organisations such as the United Nations and UNESCO have started to advocate for alternative types of tourism. Koba (2021) states that alternative tourism has been considered a solution to overtourism since the 1980s because it provides a variety of options of tourism products and services that help reduce the negative effects of overtourism.

Moreover, alternative tourism is deeply connected with both nature and local communities. In fact, visitors who respect its principles usually prefer purchasing local products directly from local businesses in order to support the economy of a destination. Additionally, these tourists usually travel during all seasons of the year, helping to partially address the issue of seasonality in tourism. In this regard, alternative tourism can be considered a sustainable option because it encourages tourists to avoid mass tourism destinations and prefer more niche locations, which they consider to be more respectful towards the environment and society (ibid.).

Dolomites for Beginners can play a key role in promoting alternative tourism in the Dolomites. In fact, members usually tend to be directed by their peers towards the most iconic and promoted locations in the Dolomites such as the Tre Cime di Lavaredo/Drei Zinnen, the Marmolada and their surroundings. This constitutes a problem because these areas are already considered touristic hotspots of the Dolomites, as stated in Chapter 1, and, as such, are strongly affected by the issue of overtourism. In this context, the group can become a way to advertise lesser-known destinations. This can be achieved by leveraging the trust built between admin and members to redirect tourism flows away from more famous and overcrowded locations.

In order to determine the lesser-known destinations in the Dolomites, a map of the different towns and villages of this area, namely the map called "Overtourism in the Dolomites", is employed (Figure 33). This map was created with the support of the participants at the workshop "ICTs and regeneration strategies in the Alps" held at the University of Bergamo in the last months of 2024. This map was created using the *uMap* platform, which leverages *OpenStreetMap*, a global map that can be utilised and personalised under an open licence. The map uses a system of coloured points to locate towns. The colour red is used for towns affected by overtourism. The colour orange locates small cities or big towns at the valley bottom, which usually are not as attractive

for a touristic stay compared to other ones. Lastly, the colour azure identifies villages in an under-visited area. This map is shown in Figure 33 and is available at the link provided in the map's subtitle. Moreover, the map is also available to the members of *Dolomites for Beginners* as it has been posted and pinned in the Featured section of the Facebook group.
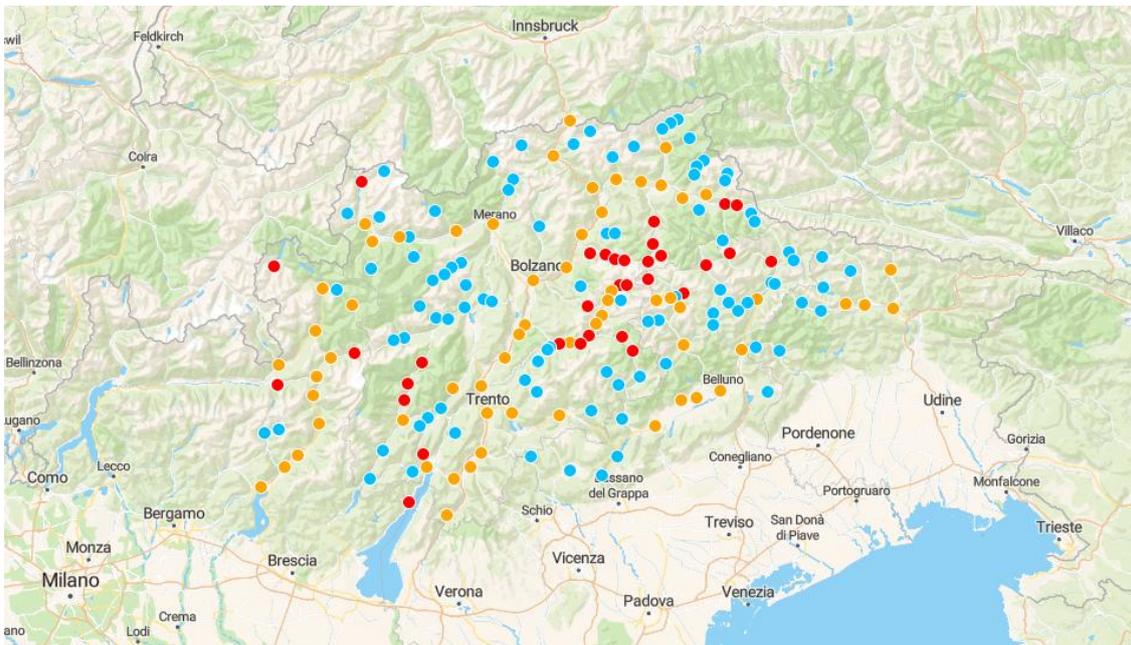
Figure 33: Map of Overtourism in the Dolomites. Red points indicate towns affected by overtourism. Orange points indicate small cities or big towns at the valley bottom, which are not particularly attractive. Azure points indicate towns in under-visited areas. Source: https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/it/map/overtourism-in-the-dolomites_1147630#8/46.243/11.970.

Figure 34 features an example of a post promoting alternative tourism in a destination in the Dolomites. This Figure can be used to describe the structure of this new series of posts. As illustrated in this sample post, the series has been given an attention-grabbing name, i.e., "Escape the Crowds: Hidden Gems of the Dolomites" in order to attract the attention of readers. This phrase is then followed by a brief explanation of the purpose of this content, which is a strategy used also in the posts related to responsible tourism in the previous section. In this way, the post can potentially be shared also on other similar groups since an explanation of the purpose of the content is provided each time. Considering the post in Figure 34, the alternative destination chosen is Andraz, a small hamlet in the Belluno province, which is best known for its medieval castle.

Figure 34: Post Alternative Tourism n.1. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [May 9, 2025]

This village has been selected as a destination complying with alternative tourism because it can potentially serve as a less crowded and more sustainable option compared to the nearby town of Arabba, which is just 7 km away (Visit Dolomiti Bellunesi, n.d.). In fact, Arabba is one of the most famous winter tourism destinations in the Dolomites due to its inclusion in the popular Dolomiti Superski ski resort, described in Chapter 3.

As a result, Arabba has become a destination suffering from overtourism. Moreover, Andraz is not strictly dependent on seasonal tourism. In fact, its most famous attraction, namely the castle, can be visited also during the spring and autumn (Castello di Andraz, n.d.). This hamlet also benefits from its strategic position. While this position was important for its military power in the past, it is now crucial for tourists who can decide to stay in Andraz while visiting the surrounding area thanks to one-day trips. The post also underlines how Andraz can provide its visitors with a cultural and historical experience since it allows them to experience the traditions and customs of this area. In this way, tourism could also support the local economy of this small and remote village. Considering all this, travelling to Andraz not only serves as an example of alternative tourism in the Dolomites but also complies with the principles of responsible tourism because it involves a type of vacation that respects the environment while bringing benefits to the local community of this small Dolomitic valley.

Figure 35 provides a second example of a post providing the members of *Dolomites for Beginners* with information about another destination aligning with alternative tourism, namely Cibiana di Cadore, a town in the Belluno province located near Cortina d'Ampezzo. As in the case of Andraz, Cibiana di Cadore was selected as an alternative destination because it can potentially become a more sustainable option to the town of Cortina d'Ampezzo, which is one of the destinations that most suffer from overtourism in the Dolomites. Cibiana allows tourists to visit the Dolomitic mountains in a more relaxed way thanks to its position outside of the main roads crossing the Cadore territory. Additionally, it provides tourists with an authentic cultural experience, which is related to the features of the village itself. In fact, several houses of the village are decorated with murals. These murals are unique works of art that depict the history of this place through the illustrations of local traditions, traditional crafts and legends (Dolomiti.org., n.d.). Also due to its remote position, most accommodation structures in Cibiana are small and family-run. As a result, tourists who choose to stay here during their vacations directly support the local economy and community. Moreover, Cibiana is a destination that can attract tourists all year long: its focus on cultural tourism through its history connected to the murals becomes an advantage also in reducing its dependence on seasonal tourism. Considering all this, Cibiana stands as an example of an alternative destination, not only due to its location outside of main touristic routes but also because

it offers tourists the opportunity to explore the history and culture of the Dolomites in an authentic and sustainable way, bringing benefits to both the environment and the community. By choosing Cibiana, members of the group could mitigate overtourism while experiencing the Dolomites from a unique perspective, all year long.

Figure 35: Post Alternative Tourism n.2. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [June 24, 2025]

The examples of posts provided in this section, which promote destinations like Andraz and Cibiana di Cadore, are instrumental in illustrating how the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners* can become crucial in the promotion of alternative destinations in the Dolomites. In fact, these towns represent locations that are lesser-known to the general public but appear as attractive as more known destinations, effectively redirecting tourism flows away from locations suffering from overtourism and spreading these arrivals even during low and shoulder seasons.

5.3. Posts Educating on Safety in the Dolomites

After describing the importance of educating members of the group on the issues related to tourism by describing principles related to responsible tourism, as well as listing examples of destinations that should be preferred based on the guidelines of alternative tourism, this section aims at explaining the behaviour tourists should adopt particularly when engaging in activities related to the Dolomites as a destination for mountain tourism. In fact, the Dolomites are widely recognised as one of the most important destinations in the mountain tourism industry. However, this sector is highly sensitive and vulnerable because it is influenced by several climate and geological hazards (Regmi et al., 2024).

Like all mountain regions across the world, the Dolomites are affected by disasters and unexpected events, which can cause harm not only to residents and tourists but also to the image of the destination (ibid.). Considering these particular characteristics, visitors should be educated in order to prevent this type of situation and also to be prepared to deal with their potential consequences. In this sense, the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners* can play a crucial role in raising awareness on mountain safety, broadening its purpose beyond the mitigation of overtourism. This group has always targeted users with no prior knowledge of the Dolomitic area: educating them on mountain safety appears therefore crucial to ensure they can safely visit this area. In fact, many members travel to the mountains to engage in activities such as skiing, trekking and climbing: these activities can become dangerous if members are not adequately informed about their potential risks.

This section aims at providing examples of posts that can be shared in the Facebook group in order to provide members with the necessary knowledge to safely visit the Dolomites. These posts contain information gathered through official sources, in particular the CNSAS – Corpo Nazionale Soccorso Alpino e Speleologico (National Alpine and Speleological Rescue Service), whose functions were explained in Chapter 4. The employment of this official source is instrumental in providing reliable information to the members, who can trust the accuracy of the content.

All posts aimed at educating members about the safety in the Dolomites are comprised in a weekly series called *Safety Saturday*. The purpose of this name is to establish a consistent posting pattern: members become aware that they will receive new information on this particular topic every Saturday. Saturday was selected to post this type of content because it was discovered to be the day with the highest engagement according to the analysis comprised in Chapter 3. Moreover, sharing tips on this day allows members to read them before or during their mountain activities, which are usually carried out during the weekend. As with the content related to responsible and alternative tourism, each post contains a brief presentation of its purpose. This allows to create cohesion among different posts and to facilitate their sharing across similar groups. Additionally, a tailored image with the name of the series was created in order to create a visual pattern among posts belonging to the series.

In this section, sample posts belonging to the series *Safety Saturday* are presented and described. These posts provide safety information both for summer and winter mountain tourism. In the weekly content management of the group, posts will be tailored to reflect the conditions of the mountains in relation to the specific season.

Figure 36 contains an example of a post belonging to the series *Safety Saturday* that can be shared during the summer time. In addition to following the structure selected for this series, the post contained in Figure 36 allows to describe other features of the content shared on *Safety Saturday*. Official information of CNSAS is simplified and condensed in order to enable all members to understand it quickly. In this particular case, members are provided with information on the list of items they should carry in their backpacks when exploring the mountains in the summer. The inventory is structured to be used by tourists as a check-list before embarking on a trail, making it immediately

useful for members with no prior knowledge of the area. In order to ensure an immediate understanding of the content, the post also includes images that provide a visual representation of the check-list.

Figure 36: Post Safety n.1. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [April 19, 2025]

Figure 37 presents another post of this series, offering guidance on the aspects of layering clothes and selecting footwear for summer hiking.
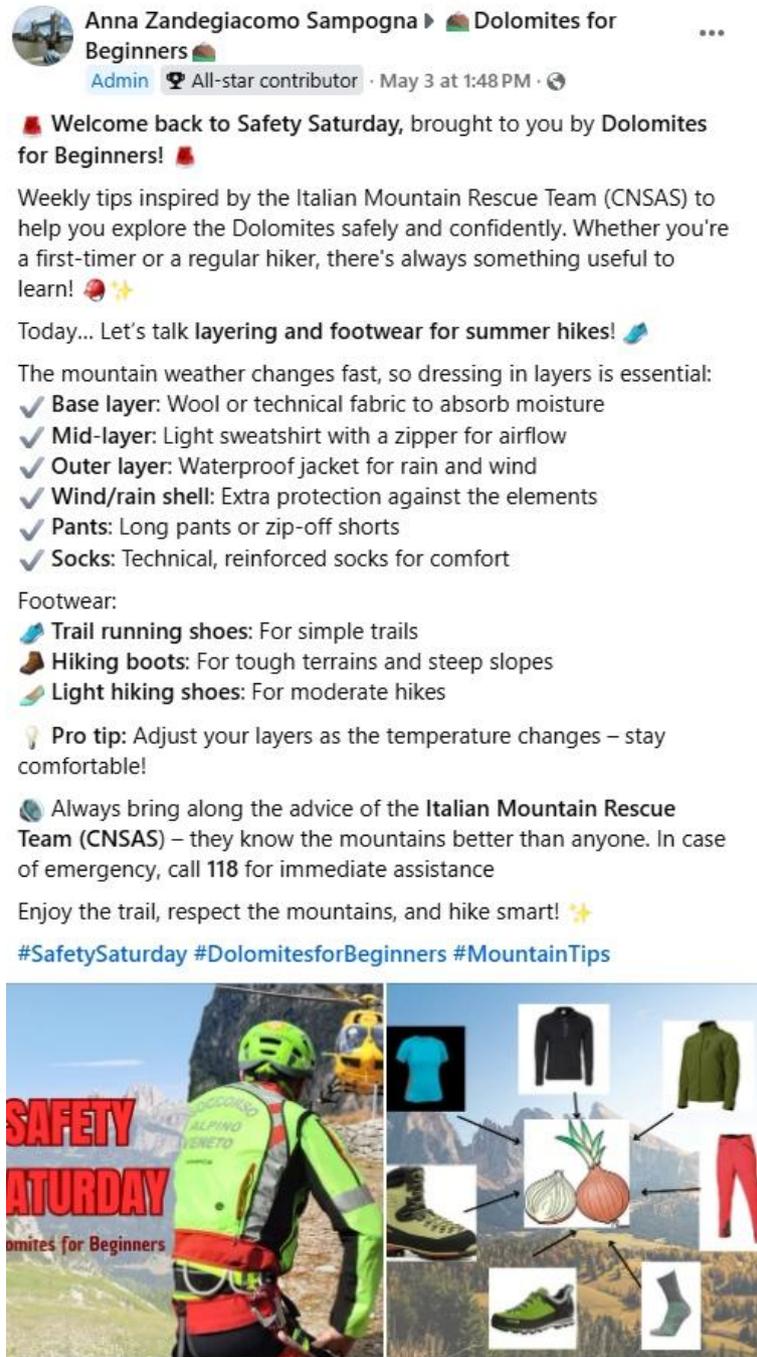

Figure 37: Post Safety n.2. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [May 3, 2025]

Similar to the previous post, this one also uses a check-list, even in a visual format, to ensure immediate comprehension. The content of this post is particularly relevant

because members often seek assistance from their peers regarding the most appropriate type of equipment to use in the Dolomites, particularly footwear. This is illustrated in Figure 38, which features two distinct requests from members concerning this particular issue. Consequently, this shows how *Safety Saturday* can be tailored even to the specific requests of members in order to provide the knowledge directly requested by them.
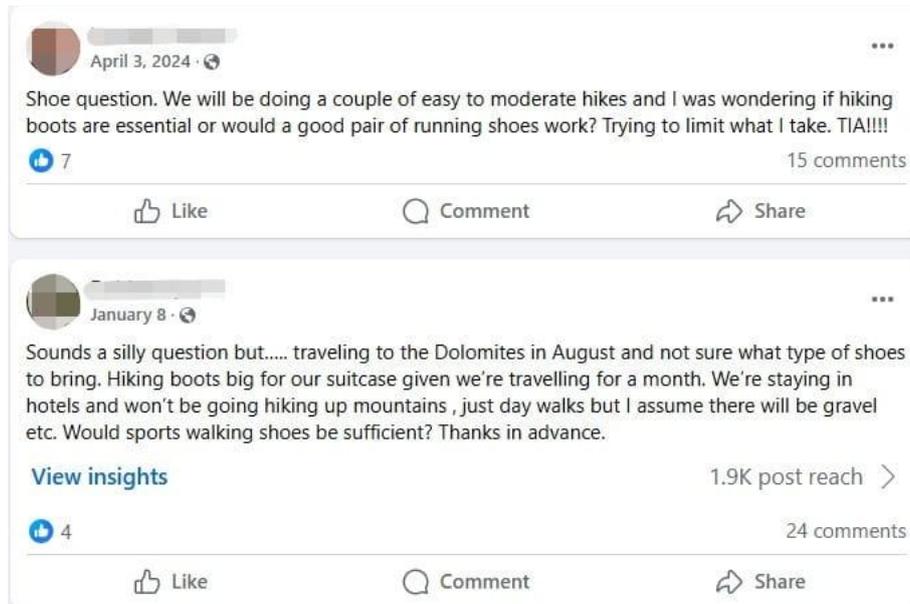
Figure 38: Request on safety information by two members. Source: Facebook [Dolomites for Beginners]

Although *Safety Saturday* can share tips on how to prevent accidents in the mountains, information should also be provided to assist members in dealing with dangerous situations, such as in the case of a rescue by helicopter, as illustrated in Figure 39. Particularly, the post explains the behaviour that members should adopt when they see a helicopter approach them in a mountain environment. The post provides a set of guidelines to follow depending on whether the helicopter is being sent for their assistance or not.

Figure 39: Post Safety n.3. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [May 10, 2025]

Considering all posts of this series presented in this section, it can be concluded that *Safety Saturday* serves two main purposes. On the one hand, it aims at fostering higher engagement within the group while providing members with reliable knowledge

about the territory they are going to visit. On the other, this series actively contributes to accident prevention in the Dolomitic mountains and offers initial guidance in case of emergency in the mountain environment. As it can be noticed in all the content described previously, the final section of each post always redirects the attention to the CNSAS, providing members with the emergency contact numbers they could need in case of an accident. Furthermore, the weekly series *Safety Saturday* serves as a way to raise awareness on mountain safety among a broader audience leveraging the popularity that *Dolomites for Beginners* has gained over the past two years. In this sense, the strategies that are anchored to this Facebook group not only help mitigate overtourism but also go beyond the new purpose of *Dolomites for Beginners* by educating members on the mountain environment they visit.

6. Strategies to Implement in the Outside World: from the Community to the Brand

This chapter aims at describing other strategies that can be implemented by the group *Dolomites for Beginners* in order to contribute to the mitigation of overtourism in the Dolomites. Unlike the previous chapter, which proposed initiatives related to posts that remained anchored within the group, this chapter examines posts that establish connections with the outside world, engaging with several communities and stakeholders. In this regard, these initiatives aim at increasing the positive effects of the activity of the group beyond Facebook virtual borders. In fact, raising awareness only on responsible and alternative tourism along with information on mountain safety appears to limit the potential of this group to actively mitigate overtourism.

A first strategy, provided in section 6.1, entails the promotion of slow tourism destinations in the group, namely locations offering activities that advertise a more informed and sustainable way of discovering a destination. A second strategy, provided in section 6.2, focuses on the introduction of content connected to experiential tourism in order to make members aware of more authentic and meaningful experiences, which can allow them to really connect with the Dolomitic territories. Section 6.3 describes how the online Facebook community *Dolomites for Beginners* can be transformed into a brand. This section introduces the brand associated with the Facebook group by highlighting the importance of branding in today's world. Building on the background provided in the first two sections of this chapter, it presents the strong brand identity of *Dolomites for Beginners* through the application of the brand steering wheel by Esch. In fact, creating a clear brand identity appears crucial to introduce the third strategy that will enable to broaden the effects of the Facebook group in the outside world, namely the creation of affiliations with other local organisations, presented in section 6.3.1.

These affiliations will be based on the theory related to affiliate marketing and will be explained in relation to the brand identity of *Dolomites for Beginners*. The last section, namely section 6.4, builds on the brand in order to describe opportunities for brand growth and other possible initiatives that could leverage technology to broaden the positive effects of the Facebook group and brand *Dolomites for Beginners* in the future.

6.1. Posts Promoting Slow Tourism

Slow tourism is a new segment of tourism, which stems from the application of the philosophy of the Slow Food Movement to the tourism sector (Heitmann et al., 2011). Slow Food Movement is a non-profit, eco-gastronomic organisation that was founded in 1989 in the territory near the Langhe wine district in Northern Italy. It was created as a reaction towards the spreading of the fast-food concept in the country, especially after the introduction of the McDonald's franchise, which was causing the disappearance of local food traditions and the consequent decrease in the interest of visitors for them. Since its creation, Slow Food has advocated for more sustainable and slow conditions of life with food as its central element (ibid.).

Applying these ideas to the realm of tourism, slow tourism aims at respecting local history, culture and environment while trying to enable a connection among tourists and between tourists and local communities (ibid.). In this sense, it targets especially visitors who prefer discovering the destination by immersing themselves in the everyday life of the local community and by directly engaging with the local culture and heritage (Ferrari & Iaffaldano, 2021). In this sense, slow tourism can be approached from different perspectives, as argued by Heitmann et al. (2011). One of its key elements is the use of more environmentally friendly forms of transport to reach a destination.

Slow tourists usually engage also in activities such as hiking and cycling, which are slower forms of movement that allow them to interact with the local communities and the surrounding environment. Slow tourists also prefer choosing self-catering accommodation. Ferrari and Iaffaldano (2021) argue that these tourists usually stay in B&Bs and Diffuse Hotels owned by local residents. Moreover, slow tourists are more inclined to buy food from local businesses. In fact, as in the philosophy of the Slow Food movement, local food becomes central also in the slow tourism experience as another effective way to connect with the destination and its local community (ibid.).

Albanese (2013) describes slow tourism as being articulated in six different dimensions: time, slowness, contamination, authenticity, sustainability and emotion. The first dimension, namely the temporal one, is mostly related to the time that local stakeholders invest in order to improve the quality of services and activities offered to visitors. Heitmann et al. (2011) further underline the importance of engaging in activities
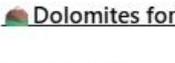
that are characterised by higher levels of engagement and immersion in the local context compared to what typically occurs in other tourism forms. Slowness focuses on the introduction, construction and promotion of products and services that can cater to slow tourists.

Contamination refers to the ability of stakeholders, who belong to different sectors and territories, to interact and create combined tourism systems. In this sense, Matos-Wasem (2004) underlines that it is crucial to motivate and involve all stakeholders in the development of a slow tourism offer in order to make it effective and successful. Authenticity means highlighting the offer of more differentiated products and services connected to the culture and environment of the specific destination in order to reduce commodification (Albanese, 2013). Related to this, Heitmann et al. (2011) emphasise how slow tourists are seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the destination they visit, going beyond the more superficial and standardised tourism offer.

Sustainability refers to the objective of slow tourism to reduce the environmental impact of tourism. In fact, slow tourism as a philosophy lays its foundations on the three pillars of sustainability, i.e., economic, environmental and social (Matos-Wasem, 2004). Lastly, emotion is the central core of slow tourism as this tourism form should aim at offering unique and memorable experiences to the visitor (Albanese, 2013). Overall, slow tourism refers to a form of tourism where a tourist "rejects the tourism infrastructure with Western amenities, commodified products, standardised services and the focus on consumption" (Heitmann et al., 2011, p.121). However, it should not be considered synonymous with backwardness: slow tourism encourages tourists to stay longer in a destination combining this slowness with modernity and technology (Matos-Wasem, 2004).

Slow tourism can play an even more crucial role in the mountain environment. Matos-Wasem (2004) argues that some mountain destinations are experiencing challenges due to outdated tourism infrastructure and reduction in the amount of snow due to global warming. In this context, slow tourism could become a way to revive tourism in these areas. The Dolomites are one of the areas that are facing these challenges and, as such, could potentially benefit from the introduction of a tourism offer based on the principles of slow tourism.

In this context, *Dolomites for Beginners* could play a crucial role in raising awareness on slow tourism in the Dolomites. In this new series of posts focused on slow tourism, the group aims at advertising destinations that are not only lesser-known but that can be visited applying the principles of slow tourism. This is considered to be a further option to mitigate overtourism in the Dolomites for two reasons: it enables to direct tourism flows towards less frequented locations while also introducing a form of tourism that enables to discover the environment, culture and heritage of these areas in a more sustainable and slow way. In order to attract members to these destinations, the posts provide a brief description of the municipality or specific destination, adding specific suggestions on how to visit them respecting slow tourism guidelines.

Figure 40: Post slow tourism n.1. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [June 5, 2025]

Figure 40 features a post that advertises a potential slow tourism destination in the Dolomites, namely Val di Zoldo, a valley located in the Belluno province. Val di Zoldo has been chosen as a potential slow tourism destination for several reasons. As stated in the post, Val di Zoldo is located far from main routes crossing the Dolomites: attracting visitors to Val di Zoldo represents a way to direct tourism flows away from more overcrowded Dolomitic locations towards those that would benefit from the arrival of a greater number of guests. Moreover, Val di Zoldo appears to be a perfect destination for slow tourists. In fact, Val di Zoldo offers many different activities and services that allow visitors to respect the surrounding environment while discovering the area.

As described in the post, visitors can engage in different activities such as walking, snowshoeing, horseback riding and cycling. Additionally, Val di Zoldo is a location where tourists can directly connect with the local heritage and culture through a particular local product, namely the ice cream. In fact, the ice cream is a product that can create a connection between local communities and visitors, who, in turn, are granted a more authentic experience of the Dolomites going beyond strictly mountain activities. The focus on this local product aligns with the foundational background of slow tourism, rooted in the Slow Food movement.

Figure 41 provides a further example of a slow tourism destination in the Dolomites, namely Val di Funes (Villnößtal in German). Val di Funes is particularly suited to promote a vacation that respects the guidelines of slow tourism as it is the first Slow Food Travel destination in South Tyrol (Slow Food Italia, n.d.). Slow Food Travel is a project connected to the broader concept of Slow Food that aims at developing and promoting a tourism experience in such a way as to be coherent with the Slow Food philosophy, described at the beginning of this section (Villnöss Tourismus Genossenschaft, n.d.). Moreover, the connection of this valley with Slow Food is strengthened by the presence of two Slow Food Presidia, i.e., the alpine grey cattle and the Villnösser Brillenschaf sheep. More specifically, the Presidia refer to Slow Food communities that have the objective of preserving local products or livestock by safeguarding and transmitting traditional production techniques while protecting the environment (Slow Food Foundation, n.d.).

Figure 41: Post slow tourism n.2. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [June 19, 2025]

Additionally, Val di Funes has been recognised as an "Alpine Pearl", the label for destinations that offer sustainable tourism experiences by promoting eco-mobility and the protection of the Alpine environment (Alpine Pearls, n.d.). This label allows Val di Funes to be coherent with one of the principles of slow tourism, namely sustainable

transportation. These certifications awarded to Val di Funes are part of a very specific tourism strategy adopted by this destination: this valley has consistently rejected the construction of ski lifts that would have connected Val di Funes with the adjacent valleys of Val Gardena and Val Badia, both known for their focus on winter tourism (Slow Food Italia, n.d.). Rather than opting for this, Val di Funes has preferred to attract tourists by promoting other resources such as its landscapes, biking trails, and climbing opportunities, as highlighted in the post. As a result, Val di Funes, like Val di Zoldo, functions as an example of a slow tourism destination in the Dolomites.

As argued in the theoretical framework provided at the beginning of this section, slow tourism allows to explore a destination at a more relaxed pace. One way to achieve this, especially in the mountain environment, is connecting this tourism form to a new organisational work model, namely "smart working". The practice of smart-working allows employees to work outside their workplace according to a flexible time schedule thanks to the employment of new technological advancements (Angelici & Profeta, 2020). In this regard, it aligns with the foundational theory of slow tourism, which creates a synergy between modernity and technology, as stated previously (Matos-Wasem, 2004).

Due to the lack of restrictions in terms of location, smart workers are able to work from anywhere in the world. This flexibility can become particularly useful for workers who would like to travel more often or for longer periods of time. Taking this into account, smart workers can become potential slow tourists: smart workers can spend more time in a destination since they can work during designated hours and dedicate the remaining time to discover the destination following the sustainable principles of slow tourism. This type of arrangement is especially suited to a vacation in the Dolomites.

Figure 42 features a suggestion of a potential vacation advertised on the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*, which is based on the connection between slow tourism and smart working.

Figure 42: Post slow tourism n.3. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [June 12, 2025]

The post advertises a vacation that identifies the Fratelli De Gasperi mountain hut as main accommodation. This mountain hut is located close to Sappada, a town located in the higher part of the Udine province, which is considered to be a lesser-frequented area of the Dolomites. In this sense, advertising such a destination aligns with the new purpose of the group *Dolomites for Beginners*, namely mitigating overtourism in the

Dolomitic area and redirecting visitors to lesser-frequented destinations. Moreover, this mountain hut aligns perfectly with the principles of slow tourism. Visitors can reach this mountain hut only on foot, allowing them to discover the beauty of these mountains while respecting the surrounding environment.

Upon arrival at the mountain hut, tourists are given the opportunity to learn about the local heritage and culture, in line with the guidelines of slow tourism. In fact, the mountain hut allows tourists to become acquainted with the culture and history of the area thanks to the many activities it organises, such as concerts, interviews with local alpinists, culinary and wood carving workshops (Rifugio Fratelli De Gasperi, n.d.). However, the characteristics of this mountain hut make it a potential destination for smart workers as well. Since 2021, the owners of this mountain hut have taken measures to establish an efficient Internet connection in their premises and they have also decided to dedicate one of the rooms to smart workers (UdineToday, 2021). In this way, smart workers are able to work and sleep in the mountain hut, which provides them with both accommodation and working space.

All in all, the Fratelli De Gasperi Mountain Hut can cater not only to day visitors but to guests looking for a prolonged stay in the Dolomites. It represents an example of how the Dolomites are a destination for slow tourists and also for smart workers, who would like to apply the guidelines of slow tourism to their vacations but do not have enough vacation days to do so as ordinary visitors.

6.2. Posts Promoting Experiential Tourism

This section provides an overview of experiential tourism, namely another tourism form that can be introduced in the form of specific posts in the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners* in order to mitigate overtourism in the Dolomites. Promoting slow tourism destinations and activities, as described in the previous section, appears to be only the first step in achieving this purpose. In this regard, experiential tourism is recognised as a strategy to effectively satisfy the needs of tourists of connecting with the Dolomitic destinations while respecting the environment and local communities. In order to provide a theoretical foundation to the suggested posts, experiential tourism will be first explained

and described with particular focus on the theory of the experience and on its connection with experiential marketing.

According to Rajan (2015, p.121), experiential tourism refers to the emerging tourism trend of "creating experiences that engage visitors in a series of memorable activities, […], that are inherently personal, engage the senses, and make connections on an emotional, physical, spiritual, or intellectual level". Experiential tourism expands on the theory of the experience, proposed by scholars Pine and Gilmore. Several industries, especially the tourism sector, are now aiming at creating experiences for customers, striving to reach the so-called experience economy (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011).

Pine and Gilmore describe the experience economy as the last stage in the development of the economic value after commodities, goods and services. In this regard, the experience becomes more important than the product or the service itself: consumers are willing to pay more for an experience, especially in the tourism industry, as they become more aware of what they prefer and eventually purchase (Dieguez & da Conceição, 2021). In fact, these visitors are searching for destinations that can fulfill their desire to live memorable experiences, which, in turn, can help them build their identity and personality (Dieguez & da Conceição, 2021).

This theory is confirmed also by Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) who underline how individuals demonstrate a willingness to create their own identity and personality by engaging in different experiences. In fact, the experience refers to an "event that engages the individual in a personal way" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, as cited by Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011, p.241). This engagement can take place at different levels and intensities across the "Four Realms of an Experience", or domains, theorised by Pine and Gilmore and depicted in Figure 43. Each experience undertaken by the individual can be described taking into consideration two different axes: the horizontal axis, related to the level of participation of the individual in the experience, progressing from passive to active participation, and the vertical axis, referring to the level of emotional involvement with the experience, shifting from absorption to immersion (Dieguez & da Conceição, 2021).
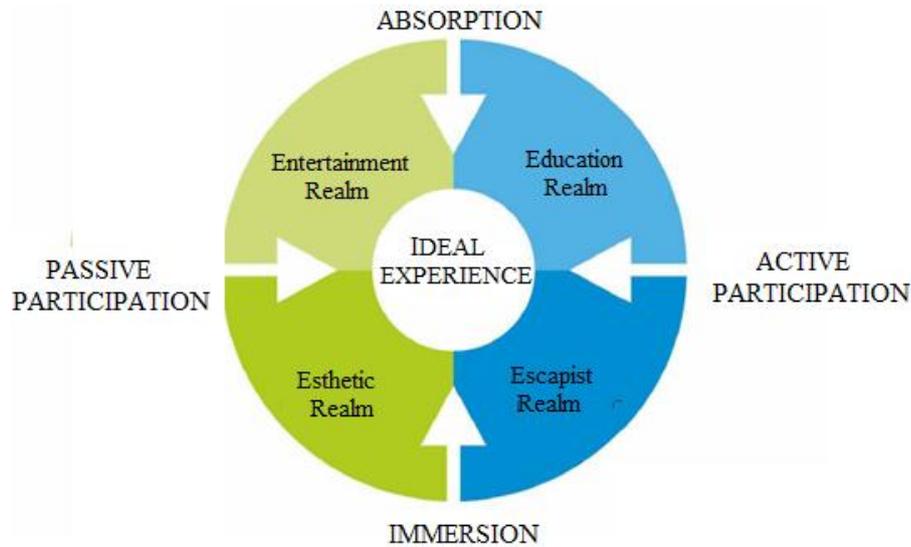
Figure 43: The Four Realms of an Experience. Source: Dieguez & da Conceição (2021)

According to Dieguez and da Conceição (2021), the Entertainment realm is the dimension with the highest passivity overall: the individual remains passive, merely absorbing what is happening in the outside world, such as in the case of attending a concert (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011). Conversely, if the absorption is linked to higher levels of participation, the experience belongs to the domain of Education, as observed in activities such as ski schools and diving (ibid.).

An experience can also require higher degrees of immersion rather than absorption, as in the cases of the Esthetic and the Escapist realms. On the one hand, the Esthetic domain entails a more passive participation in the experience, during which the individual can feel compelled to contemplate the surrounding environment that becomes particularly inviting and comfortable (Dieguez & da Conceição, 2021). This applies to the visits to museums or the views of spectacular landscapes. On the other hand, the Escapist realm implies that the individual is both immersed and actively engaged in the experience, granting them a true escape from reality, such as in the case of rafting (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011). Mehmetoglu and Engen (ibid., p.243) conclude that "the entertainment experience is about feeling, the educational experience learning, the esthetic experience presence, and the escapist experience doing". However, they also underline that all experiences should have elements belonging to all four dimensions, even though one could be more emphasised than the others.

In the case of the tourism industry, destinations should be able to offer experiences that respect all four dimensions, creating the so-called "ideal experience", as affirmed by Dieguez and da Conceição (2021). In fact, these destinations and the tourism businesses located in them should focus on offering these types of experiences since they significantly influence individuals' travel decisions (ibid.).

By leveraging the theoretical framework of the experience by Pine and Gilmore described in the previous paragraph, Rajan (2015) provides another definition of experiential tourism: he cites the American scholar Ted Eubanks, who described it in 2004 as everything that visitors feel, touch, see and do. This aligns with the ideas of Pine and Gilmore, who argue that experiences are shaped by "what one sees, hears, touches, smells and tastes" (Lagiewski & Zekan, 2006, p.166). In this sense, experiential tourism involves all five senses and enables visitors to participate in authentic experiences that include all features of a destination. These aspects comprise not only the places tourists visit but also the communities they encounter, the accommodation they choose for their stay, the activities they partake in and the memories they create (Rajan, 2015.).

Taking all these different elements into account, experiential tourism encourages guests to connect with the local culture, history and nature through a direct experience of the destination. However, due to the intense competition within the tourism market, destinations need to actively take measures to draw visitors in. This can be successfully achieved if destinations promote experiences shifting their methods from traditional to experiential marketing (Dieguez & da Conceição, 2021).
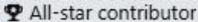
Schmitt (1999) underlines the differences between traditional and experiential marketing. Traditional marketing generally focuses on the basic characteristics of the product or service, namely their features and benefits. These products/services are marketed considering their narrow category and their direct competition with similar products. The customers of these products are considered rational beings, who complete a purchase after recognising the need for a product/service and gathering information on different existing alternatives.

Considering these aspects, traditional marketers usually employ tools and methods that are analytical, quantitative and verbal. Conversely, Schmitt (ibid.) argues

that experiential marketing focuses on the overall experience of customers rather than only on products' basic features. These experiences are marketed considering the overall consumption as a holistic experience, which extends beyond the narrow categories of singular products and services. Moreover, experiential marketers expand the notion of customers as rational beings, arguing that emotions play a crucial role in their consumption choices and purchases. In order to cater to the needs of these rational and emotional consumers, the methods employed by experiential marketers are more eclectic, intuitive and visual compared to traditional ones. Applying this to the tourism realm, this shift enables to evolve beyond a mere promotion of physical destination features towards advertising their emotional attributes that can create enduring memories of the experiences lived by visitors (Lagiewski & Zekan, 2006).

After explaining the theoretical basis of experiential tourism and the linked experiential marketing practices, Figure 44 and Figure 45 provide examples of how these two theories can be introduced in the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners* in order to contribute to the mitigation of overtourism in the Dolomites along with the other sample posts provided in these last two chapters.

Figure 44 entails the promotion of the experience of the Desmonteada, a traditional event that takes place at the beginning of October, namely during the shoulder season, in the town of Auronzo di Cadore (BL) and in many other villages of the Dolomites. The decision to promote this initiative in this particular location stems from the desire to prove how the Facebook group can help deseasonalize tourist flows also in valleys that are usually characterised by overtourism, especially during the winter and summer seasons, like the village of Auronzo di Cadore. In this particular post, experiential tourism becomes a means through which this goal can be achieved. In fact, promoting this particular event with its specific characteristics is coherent with the statement of Dieguez and da Conceição (2021), already mentioned previously, which underlines how destinations are expected to offer touristic experiences that can consider all four domains of the experience.
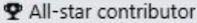
Figure 44: Post experiential tourism n.1. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [May 29, 2025]

Analysing the event of the Desmonteada through the lens of the theory of the experience, it can be argued that both domains of the passive participation are respected. In fact, the Esthetic dimension is evoked by the setting of the event, characterised by the surrounding natural and rural environment along with the traditional decorations and dresses, which visitors can admire. This setting becomes the background for the Entertainment domain in the form of live music, traditional dances and performances by local people. However, the experience of the Desmonteada also complies with the dimensions related to the active participation by the tourist. In fact, visitors can not only admire the performances and activities organised during this event but actively take part in them, addressing in this way the Escapist domain of the experience.

Moreover, the last dimension, namely Education, is respected in the many related activities dedicated to children and their families, such as the educational farm and traditional games, which provide the opportunity to understand local culture and traditions. Overall, the Desmonteada functions as an example of how destinations can offer meaningful experiences to tourists, attracting them in their valleys during less crowded periods. Moreover, this type of content aligns with the theory of experiential marketing by describing the overall emotional attributes of the destination, which are able to evoke strong emotions that will be remembered by tourists even after the visit.

Figure 45 features a post centred on another experience, which can be promoted in the Facebook group in the context of leveraging experiential tourism to attract tourists in less-visited areas of the Dolomites. The experience refers to the guided tour at the Beer Factory and Museum of Pedavena, a village located near the bigger town of Feltre. Attracting visitors to this particular area of the Dolomites appears particularly important as the whole area around Feltre has experienced a negative trend in tourist arrivals over the past few years, leading to economic and social problems such as unemployment and degradation (Tzatzadaki, 2021).

Figure 45: Post experiential tourism n.2. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [June 27, 2025]

As in the case of the Desmonteada event presented in the previous figure, the guided visit to the Beer Factory and Museum of Pedavena enables to create an experience that encompasses all four domains of the experience, theorised by Dieguez and da Conceição (2021). During the experience of the guided tour, it is evident how the

Education domain emerges as the most important. In fact, visitors have access to the brewing facilities where they can engage with local experts and brewmasters by listening and asking questions in order to become aware of all the steps of the brewing process.

The opportunity to visit the museum located in the premises of the factory enhances the Education domain, enabling visitors to understand how the brewing process has changed since the foundation of the brewery in 1897. The Education domain is closely related to the Esthetic domain. In fact, visitors acquire all this knowledge while being immersed in the scenery of this historic factory, i.e., walking through preserved machinery and traditional architecture. This environment directly stimulates the dimension of Entertainment: visitors absorb this atmosphere while enjoying a multisensory experience by hearing the machinery in operation and smelling the aroma of beer.

Finally, this guided visit evokes also the Escapist domain. In fact, visitors go from a merely passive observation to a full immersion by actively participating in beer and local product tastings at the end of the visit. This multisensory involvement enables to turn a guided visit into a temporary escape from daily life in order to connect with the heritage of the destination. Considering all the domains of the experience, participation in the guided visit to the Beer Factory of Pedavena represents an example of how this town can attract tourists who would like to discover the Dolomites by participating in immersive experiences.

Moreover, Pedavena is a perfect example of how a brewery can become a key asset to attract visitors in a territory that is characterised by lower numbers of tourist arrivals compared with other Dolomitic areas, as previously mentioned. In fact, the brewery does not only organise guided tours but serves as a location for many attractions and events that can create authentic experiences for tourists. In fact, the brewery also hosts the so-called "Bottega Dolomitica", literally translated into "Dolomitic Shop", which provides local producers with a location where they can sell their local products to visitors. In this sense, even smaller local producers are granted the opportunity to reach a wider audience and support their own business. The same purpose is achieved also in another event, namely the "Mercatino Agricolo di Pedavena", literally translated into "Farmers' Market of Pedavena", which is organised each month in the park located near

the Pedavena brewery. Similarly to the "Bottega Dolomitica", this farmers' market offers local producers and artisans the opportunity to sell their products and handcrafted goods to both visitors and residents.

As in the case of the Desmonteada experience, the promotion of the guided visit in Figure 45 aligns with experiential marketing in the way it focuses on the emotional features of the visit that will produce strong emotions in visitors (Lagiewski & Zekan, 2006). These strong emotions are related to both the heritage of the destination and the active involvement of visitors in the experience provided by this location in Pedavena.

Overall, both the Desmonteada and the visit to the Beer Factory in Pedavena represent two examples of how the content in *Dolomites for Beginners* can be used to promote experiences in the Dolomitic territory in a way that enables to deseasonalize tourism flows in the first case and direct visitors towards lesser-visited areas in the second case.

6.3. Building the Brand from the Community

As discussed in the previous section, experiential marketing focuses on emphasising the emotional aspects associated with destinations (Lagiewski & Zekan, 2006). Maulani and Presetyo (2018) expand on this notion by underlining its capacity to evoke emotions and feelings, which may result in positive outcomes not only for the tourist experience but also for the marketing performance, particularly in terms of increased sales. They argue that promoting such experiences plays a crucial role in persuading tourists to trust, choose and, ultimately, be loyal to the brand that provides these experiences, which, in this context, is represented by the destination (ibid.). Experiential marketing and branding have long been closely linked, as Schmitt (1999) asserts. According to him (ibid.), the shift from traditional to experiential marketing stems from three major developments in the business sector, namely the omnipresence of information technology, the ubiquity of communication and entertainment and the supremacy of the brand. Based on this perspective, Schmitt further argues that today everything can become and can be treated as a brand (ibid.).

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Brand has been defined by the American Marketing Association as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller […] and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (Guzmán, 2004, p.1). However, Esch (2009) argues that perceiving a brand only as a logo that visually represents a company is a very limited approach, resulting in these businesses not considering the brand as an important factor in their operations. In order to solve this issue and make companies perceive the relevance of the brand, Esch (ibid.) introduces a type of analysis focused on brand identity, which he considers the fundamental guiding principle that managers should adopt in order to act effectively and build successful brands. He states that each brand is characterised by a unique identity, known as brand identity, which makes it recognisable to consumers (ibid.). The brand identity is connected to the company, i.e., the sender's side: it is actively produced by the business who wants to present a specific self-image to its consumers.

Esch (ibid.) further argues that the brand identity is crucial also for the establishment of brand positioning and brand image in the mind of stakeholders, which include consumers. On the one hand, he asserts that the company's brand identity serves as the basis for brand positioning, which involves showcasing the distinctive features that differentiate the company from its competitors by making its specific products more attractive. The brand positioning will affect the marketing mix in all its elements, i.e., product, price, place and promotion. On the other, Esch (ibid.) underlines how introducing a strong brand identity is crucial to create a clear brand image in the minds of stakeholders. Esch describes brand image as the picture that stakeholders will perceive as associated with the brand based on the interaction they will have with its specific marketing mix activities such as products, services and communication. In this regard, brand image is related to the receiver's side, reflecting the way consumers will understand the brand itself (Guzmán, 2004).

However, Esch (2009) argues that establishing a successful brand identity can be challenging without a proper theoretical background. Considering this challenge, Esch (2014) proposes the use of the brand steering wheel, which was first introduced by Icon Added Value, a consulting company based in Germany working in the marketing field, and then further developed by Esch himself. The brand steering wheel is now employed as a tool in many companies both in Germany and around the world. The layout and the

foundational theory of the brand steering wheel derive from the theory of the hemisphere specialization of the human brain. According to this theory, the left hemisphere governs logical evaluations, while the right hemisphere is in charge of the production of emotions. Figure 46 provides a visual representation of the brand steering wheel based on the theory by Esch. The left-hand side contains the rational elements of the brand called hard facts, namely brand attributes and brand benefits, and it answers the stakeholders' question "What is in it for me?". The right-hand side, i.e., the soft facts, reflect the emotions and non-verbal elements of the brand, namely brand tonalities and brand iconography, and it answers the stakeholders' question "How do I feel about it?".
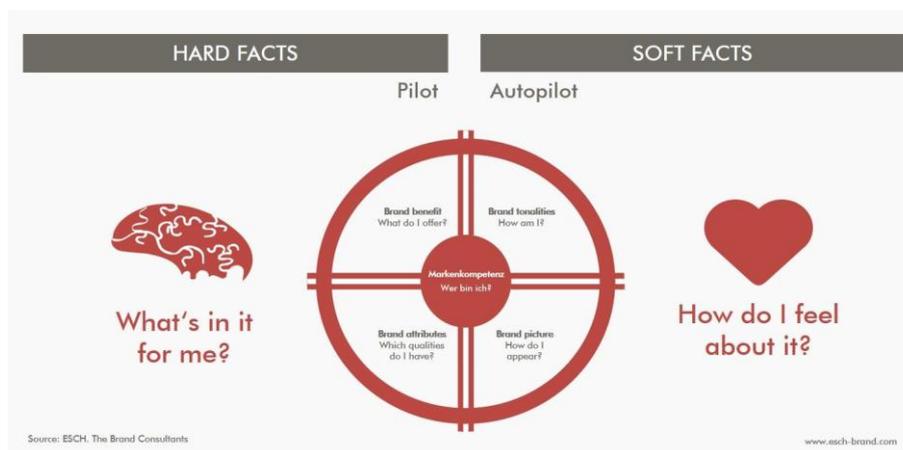
Figure 46: The Brand Steering Wheel by Esch. Source: https://www.esch-brand.com/en/brand-strategy-and-brand-implementation/

The next paragraphs will provide a description of the four quadrants of the brand steering wheel by applying them to the case study of the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners*. The application of the theory of the brand to the case study of *Dolomites for Beginners* is particularly relevant as the Facebook group was initially created as an independent entity within this social media platform; its potential to become a brand emerged only at a later stage. This represents an inversion of the typical process in which the brand is usually created before establishing a social network profile or page associated with it. In fact, Vukasovič (2013) states that marketers usually employ social media as a marketing tool to inform consumers about an established brand and allow them to interact with it. *Dolomites for Beginners* represents a unique case where consumers are already aware of the features and benefits of the group before the introduction of a brand associated with it.

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Considering the hard facts related to the brand, the brand steering wheel is divided into brand benefits and brand attributes. Esch (n.d.) describes brand attributes as the factual and measurable qualities of the brand. These can be related to two aspects, i.e., the material elements of the product/service and the features of the company. Both aspects can be applied to *Dolomites for Beginners*. In terms of material elements of the product/service, *Dolomites for Beginners* is a Facebook group aimed at helping people without specific training or prior knowledge of the Dolomites to discover this mountain area safely. To achieve this objective, it provides them with information on easily accessible destinations and easy itineraries in the Dolomites. Moreover, steps have been taken to promote other destinations, which enable to discover this area applying the guidelines of other forms of tourism such as responsible, alternative, slow and experiential tourism. These suggestions are presented using different multimedia formats such as images, videos and maps.

In terms of the features of the company, *Dolomites for Beginners* cannot be considered an ordinary company but some features can still be drawn analysing its creation and history. In fact, as seen in Chapter 3, the group has been active since the end of 2023 and, since then, it has attracted several thousands of users. However, Esch (2014; n.d.) highlights how attributes should not be given too much importance when considering the brand as they form only the foundation for the benefits associated with it. In fact, he states that brand benefits, namely what the brand ultimately offers its consumers, should always take precedence over attributes because consumers do not buy a product for its attributes but rather for the benefits it grants them. Esch (2009) divides this category into objective-functional benefits and psychological-social benefits. Objective-functional benefits are connected to the situations of use of the product/service of the brand. In the specific case of *Dolomites for Beginners*, these benefits are related both to time and accessibility of information. In fact, the Facebook group enables members to quickly and easily access information regarding accommodation, transportation and itineraries thanks to suggestions provided by the administrators as well as advice from other members, often tailored to the specific requests of their peers.

Through the implementation of new strategies in the Facebook group, as presented in Chapter 5 and particularly in Chapter 6, members can become easily aware of specific experiences or destinations that are not so well-known but that can offer a better vacation

overall. Moreover, they can acquire knowledge on how to visit this area responsibly and safely without the need to waste time browsing multiple other websites. Psychological-social benefits are reflected in softer facts, as Esch further explains (ibid.). *Dolomites for Beginners* offers these benefits by welcoming members who first approach the Dolomites and providing them with support and reassurance while exploring this destination.

Thanks to this approach, members feel part of a community of people who are passionate about the Dolomites and are inspired to go beyond their own limits while respecting safety measures. Esch (ibid.) underlines that this last category of benefits is more important than objective-functional ones because it creates an emotional connection with consumers. It is evident from this description that benefits are directly dependent on brand attributes: if an attribute changes, the perceived benefits will inevitably shift as well. If this change is perceived negatively by stakeholders including consumers, the benefits could potentially deteriorate as well, creating issues for the brand as a whole.

Considering the soft facts related to the brand, the brand steering wheel is divided into brand tonalities and brand iconography. Esch (2014) states that brand tonalities capture the emotions and feelings that a brand evokes in consumers. This can be achieved in three different ways (Esch, 2009). The first method is determining the brand personality, namely the combination of human attributes that are associated with the brand as if it were a real person. These can include demographic characteristics and also more ordinary personality traits, which both aim at fostering a positive emotional connection between consumers and the brand. Applying this approach to the Facebook group at the centre of this research, it can be argued that *Dolomites for Beginners* could have the personality of a young adult to middle-aged person who is an expert of the Dolomites and is eager to help other members connect with their territory. This person is particularly friendly and supportive: their main objective is to welcome first-time visitors in the Dolomites and empower them to discover this area. In order to achieve this, this person employs a language whose tone is very informal and simple but practical and reliable.

The second method, i.e., determining mutual brand relationships, builds on the first one: when consumers perceive the brand as a real person, they can also create relationships with it as if they were their active partner. In the case of *Dolomites for Beginners*, consumers perceive the brand as a supportive friend who has the ability and

skills to act as their guide in their discovery of the Dolomites. From the point of view of the brand, consumers are the "beginners", as the name of the Facebook group suggests: they are people who are trying to learn how to approach this mountain area.

The third method is determining relevant experiences. In fact, consumers associate specific experiences with the brand: the feelings engendered by an experience organised by the brand will be linked to the brand itself. *Dolomites for Beginners* promotes several experiences that consumers can partake in. These experiences, such as the ones provided in Section 6.2 or even in the destinations and itineraries of other sections, allow consumers to feel part of a community of adventurers in the Dolomites, who discover this area in the most authentic and educational way possible. In addition to brand tonalities, Esch (2009) includes brand iconography in the soft facts related to the brand. Brand iconography is affected by the visual impressions that the brand manages to evoke in stakeholders. In this regard, it refers to how the brand appears to stakeholders. However, Esch (ibid.) underlines how this impression is not just based on sight but should try to include all senses.

Even though *Dolomites for Beginners* occupies mainly the virtual environment of Facebook, some multisensory elements of brand iconography can still be found. Sight is evidently the most important element of brand iconography. Admins and members are able to appeal to this particular sense by posting authentic photos and videos of this mountain area. Videos can also have a positive effect on the sense of hearing, as they allow members to virtually immerse themselves in the Dolomites. Some posts can also function as activators of the sense of taste. These posts are usually portraying local dishes, enabling members to imagine themselves consuming local food and actively encouraging them to try them once they arrive in the Dolomites.

All four quarters of the brand steering wheel are interrelated and help establish brand competence, which represents the essence of the brand identity positioned at the centre of the wheel, answering the question "Who am I?". According to Esch (ibid.), brand competence refers to the core characteristics of the brand, namely its history, its origins or its role in the market. In the case of *Dolomites for Beginners*, its history has been thoroughly described in Chapter 3 while its origins are connected to its main

objective, namely helping tourists without prior knowledge and training discover the Dolomites.

Moreover, this Facebook group is becoming more and more important among the groups connected to the Dolomites, mountains and travel in Italy, as shown in the competitor analysis included in Chapter 4. It can be argued that, even though *Dolomites for Beginners* does not possess the largest membership compared to its competitors, it is increasingly recognised as a reliable source among visitors to the Dolomites.

All in all, the brand steering wheel with its four different quarters is instrumental in helping companies establish a clear brand identity that can consider both rational and emotional aspects associated with its products/services. In order to achieve this, all aspects have to be considered not as single entities but holistically. Moreover, the brand steering wheel is a simple and accessible tool that can be developed and improved according to the changes undergone by the company during the years (Esch, n.d.).

Additionally, establishing a clear brand identity is beneficial not only in order to engage with consumers but also to build relationships with other organisations within the market. Once the brand identity is clearly defined across all its dimensions, the process of creating partnerships with other businesses and organisations becomes significantly easier, as the brand's core values, emotional tone and objectives are already well established. This is underlined also by Buil et al. (2016) who argue that a brand identity defines not only the purpose and the objectives of the brand, but it is also crucial in deciding the direction that the brand will take in the market. In fact, a clear and well managed brand identity results in different stakeholders having positive perceptions about the brand as a whole. Applying this to *Dolomites for Beginners,* it can be stated that its strong brand identity, as presented in this section, allows to establish partnerships with external organisations. This can be carried out thanks to the creation of affiliations with these businesses, applying the theory of affiliate marketing.

6.3.1. Posts Strengthening the Brand through Affiliations

The following section presents an example of how *Dolomites for Beginners* can cooperate with other organisations and businesses operating in the Dolomitic region

through the development of strategic affiliations. As outlined in the previous section, this objective can be achieved by establishing a strong and coherent brand identity connected to the Facebook group, adopting the brand steering wheel as a guiding framework. These strategic affiliations will be implemented applying the theory of affiliate marketing and will then be considered in relation to the brand identity of *Dolomites for Beginners* described in the previous section.

According to Gregori and Daniele (2011), affiliate marketing has become one of the most important methods to acquire customers and increase sales in many different sectors. Adel (2023) joined this discussion stating that affiliate marketing is now regarded as a powerful instrument even in the tourism sector due to its ability to influence tourists' decisions and behaviours in terms of their travel practices. Adel (ibid.) describes affiliate marketing in the tourism industry as the collaboration between a tourism business, namely the advertiser, and the affiliate marketer, namely the publisher. This partnership is based on an agreement between these two figures: the affiliate marketer uses his or her own platform to publicise the advertiser's products or services in exchange for a commission fee in case of successful sale.

As a result, this particular type of marketing is based on performance because compensation to the affiliate marketer is dependent on the number of clicks and purchases of customers. Adel (ibid.) continues by listing the motivating factors that led to the adoption of this type of marketing by the tourism sector. Firstly, affiliate marketing represents a financially sustainable marketing strategy for tourism businesses as affiliate marketers are compensated only in case of successful purchase by customers. Secondly, it enables tourism businesses to leverage the already-existent customer base of the publisher, who becomes a very influential promoter of the products and services due to its established reliability. Lastly, it allows tourism businesses to target an audience that could not have been reached by traditional mechanisms, increasing in this way the brand exposure. Moreover, affiliate marketing provides benefits also for the affiliate marketer such as the development of a stronger connection, increased trust and higher engagement with the existing audience. Adel (ibid.) concludes that this collaboration fosters positive effects for both parties involved: the tourism business acquires more visibility and customers, while the publisher enhances interaction with their audience, which, in turn, produces commission revenues.

Considering the potential of this form of marketing, affiliate marketing appears to be a tool to expand the potentiality of the Facebook group and brand *Dolomites for Beginners* outside the borders of the Facebook platform in order to reach the broader tourism industry thanks to collaborations with other businesses. This is supported by a statement by Adel (ibid.), who argues that affiliate marketing in tourism can operate through a wide variety of platforms, including social media. In order to realise this in practical terms while maintaining the focus on the current purpose of the group to mitigate overtourism in the Dolomites, the Facebook group implemented an affiliation with the local tourism organisation *Dolomist*[1].

Dolomist is a tourism organisation founded in 2020 by a group of friends, born and raised in the Dolomites, who decided to build a platform that could provide customers with authentic experiences in the Dolomites (Dolomist, n.d.-b). This initiative stems from their own personal passion for the Dolomitic mountains and their desire to share the beauty of their home territory with others. In order to achieve this goal, their mission involves the promotion of experiences in line with a sustainable form of tourism, which can respect both the natural environment and local communities. In this sense, their mission can be summarised in their three core values, namely sustainability, inclusion and digitalisation. Their vision builds directly on these three values, namely protecting and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage of the Dolomites through innovative digital strategies and collaboration with the local communities.

Since its establishment, Dolomist has expanded its reach and it now consists of a young team of experts in different fields such as digital marketing, communication, media and finance, along with experienced local guides. Several of these experts have decided to join this project after having gained experience all over Italy and also abroad. In this regard, these experts feel the need to repay their home territory for the benefits that it granted to them in the past in order to foster conditions that can guarantee its future (ibid.). In its daily operations, Dolomist organises authentic experiences throughout the whole year, especially during the summer and winter seasons. The experiences range in terms of difficulty and are provided in both guided and self-guided formats. The typologies of experiences vary a lot: from yoga to alpinism during the summer and from snowshoeing

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[1] https://dolomist.com/en

to ski mountaineering during the winter (Dolomist, n.d.-a). Most of these experiences share a common feature, namely the close collaboration with local communities. This collaboration can be implemented in different ways, including partnerships with local refuges, which function as accommodation during the excursions, or with local producers, which become a destination in themselves in the case of tasting experiences. The importance given to the incorporation of local community representatives and businesses in the experiences aligns with the very broad vision of sustainability held by Dolomist. According to its founders, sustainability does not only refer to protecting the environment while accompanying visitors in the Dolomites but also to providing local inhabitants with a tangible opportunity to continue working in their home territory in a financially sustainable way (Dolomist, n.d.-b).

In order to explain the structure underlying the affiliation between Dolomist and the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners* and its resulting importance, the framework "Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of Affiliate Marketing on Tourist Decision-Making" provided by Adel (2023) and shown in Figure 47 will be used.
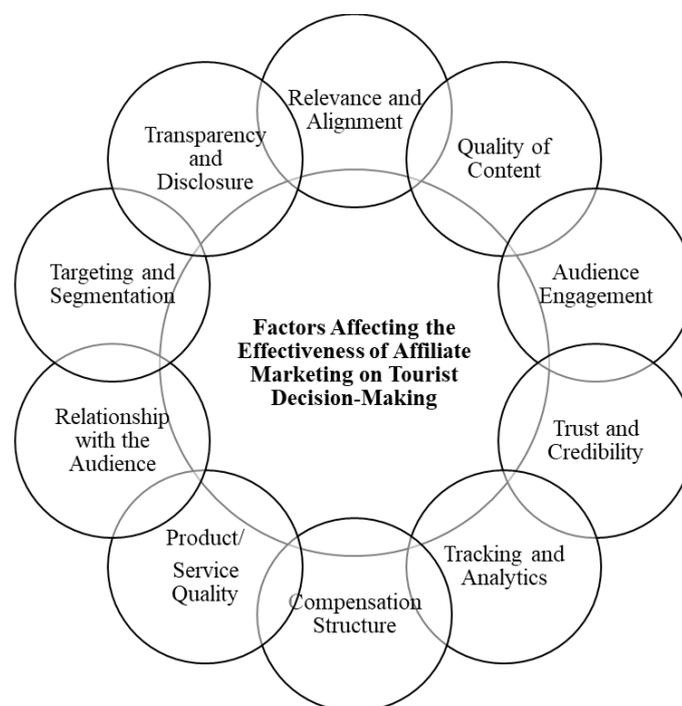

Figure 47: Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of Affiliate Marketing on Tourist Decision-Making. Source: Adel (2023, p.271)

According to Adel (ibid.), one of the most important factors for an effective affiliation is the *relevance and alignment* between the affiliate's content and the interests of the audience. In the case of *Dolomites for Beginners*, the experiences provided by Dolomist align perfectly with the interests of the members, namely having the opportunity to discover the Dolomites. This content should also be characterised by high *quality*, i.e., be able to convey the necessary information while remaining engaging enough to attract potential customers. The means by which this is achieved will be discussed in detail in the next paragraphs, using practical examples of posts. Another factor, namely *audience engagement,* can be achieved not only using posts but also providing members with personalised recommendations, interactive elements and compelling storytelling. In the Facebook group, this is implemented through specific strategies such as tailoring recommendations of Dolomist experiences to the users' specific requests and introducing interactive posts with the use of reactions, as shown in Figure 48.
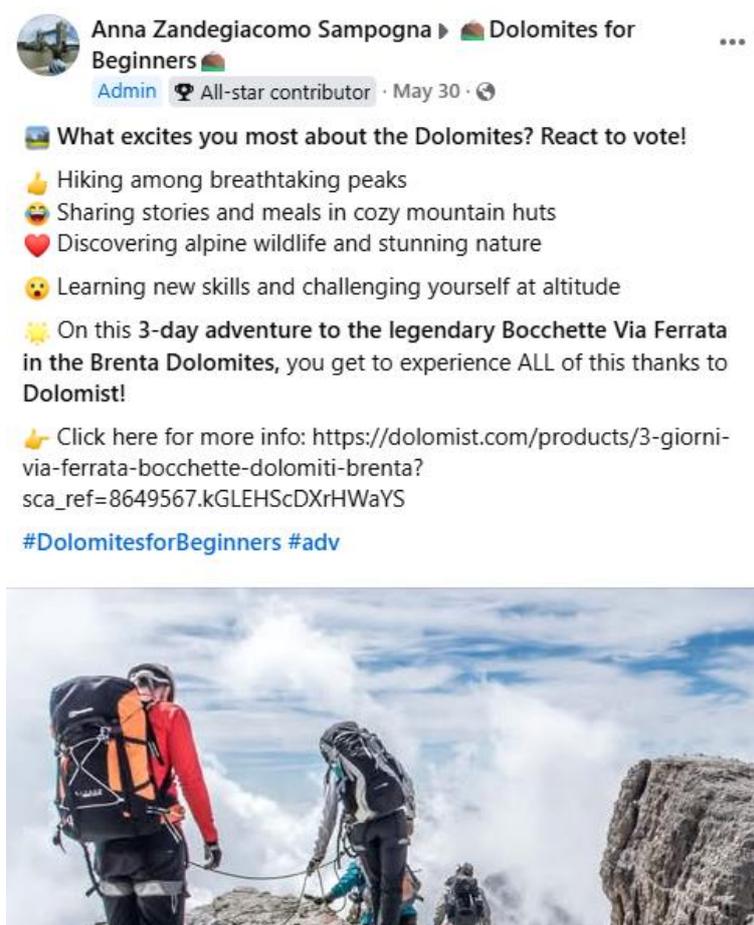

Figure 48: Interactive post for Affiliate marketing. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [May 30, 2025]

Moreover, an effective engagement can be achieved only if the affiliate marketer has built a strong *relationship with their audience*; this proves to have a greater effect on the impact that the advertised products/services have on customers' decision-making. *Dolomites for Beginners* has established a close relationship with its members since 2023, providing updated information on itineraries, accommodation structures and destinations. As a result, members trust the content posted by the admin and by other members, respecting Adel's factor of *trust and credibility* (ibid.). In fact, members of the group, and in general tourists, are more likely to be influenced by those affiliates they consider trustworthy and credible.

Gregori and Daniele (2011) align with this argument, describing trust as the essential element in creating and maintaining customer-loyalty. Additionally, an alignment can be traced between the *targeting and segmentation* of *Dolomites for Beginners* and of Dolomist, which both gather a similar audience. In terms of demographic segmentation, both entities cater to international tourists employing the English language, which is the main language used both in the Facebook group and in the guided or self-guided tours offered by Dolomist.

In terms of lifestyle segmentation, both the Facebook group and the tourism business target tourists who would like to explore the Dolomites but have little prior knowledge about this territory and its challenges. For instance, Dolomist provides its customers with clear instructions on necessary equipment, clothing and nutrition tailored to each experience in order to educate even beginner visitors to the Dolomites. Moreover, Dolomist offers beginner-level experiences in the Dolomitic mountains, aligning perfectly with the foundational purpose of *Dolomites for Beginners*, i.e., helping individuals without proper training who still want to explore the Dolomites safely.

Considering this affiliation in more technical and organisational terms, Adel (2023) continues by stressing the importance of *transparency and disclosure* regarding the affiliate relationship. In this sense, it is essential that the marketer clearly discloses their involvement in an affiliate marketing practice. In the case of *Dolomites for Beginners*, the affiliation with Dolomist is clearly disclosed by the use of the hashtag *#adv* at the end of each affiliate post. This transparency should also be supported by efficient

tracking and analytics systems, which are essential in understanding the effectiveness of the affiliate marketing efforts.

In the case of the partnership between *Dolomites for Beginners* and Dolomist, this factor is respected thanks to the platform employed by Dolomist for its affiliations, namely UpPromote. UpPromote is an affiliate marketing software, which has been employed by more than 120.000 brands around the world since its establishment in 2019 (UpPromote, n.d.). UpPromote offers reliable real-time reports on clicks, referrals, sales and commissions through the dashboard provided to the affiliate marketers, as shown in Figure 49. According to Adel (ibid.), this type of systems, such as the dashboard provided by UpPromote, are crucial in identifying and enhancing successful marketing strategies.
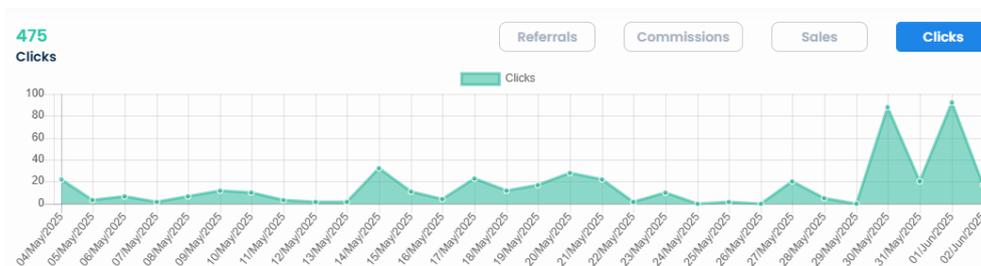

Figure 49: Dashboard Affiliation Dolomist (May - June, 2025)

The software UpPromote also describes the commission type at the base of the collaboration among the parties involved in the affiliation, respecting another important factor in the effectiveness of the affiliate marketing, namely *compensation structure*. In fact, Adel (ibid.) highlights the positive impact that an effective compensation structure has on the motivation of the affiliate marketer in promoting the advertiser's product or service. In the case of the collaboration of *Dolomites for Beginners* with Dolomist, the commission is based on a percentage of the sale: for each sale completed through the affiliate's personal link, the affiliate marketer receives 5% commission on the total purchase amount.

Lastly, Adel (ibid.) underlines the importance of assessing the *quality of the product/service* before implementing an affiliation partnership. In fact, tourists tend to be more easily influenced by affiliates that not only use high-quality content, as stated previously, but also promote high-quality products/services. In order to prove the high quality of the experiences provided by Dolomist, some examples will be provided.

Figure 50 provides an example of a post implementing the affiliation with the tourism business Dolomist in the *Dolomites for Beginners*.

Figure 50: Post affiliation Dolomist n.1. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [May 20, 2025]

The post shown in Figure 50 promotes an experience that starts in Val di Fassa, located in the north-eastern part of Trentino, to reach Pale di San Martino, a mountain group situated between Trentino and Veneto region. This post allows to describe the structure selected for the promotion of all products by Dolomist advertised in the Facebook group. After a brief introduction to the experience, the post is divided into specific sections. The first part of the post contains two important types of indications, namely the time period during which the experience is offered and level of difficulty associated with it, as stated in the official website of Dolomist. The second section provides more in-depth information on the elements of the experience that are covered by the package, such as accommodation, transport and assistance.

The third section, denominated "Highlights of the experience", describes the most attractive and engaging features of the experience. In fact, while the official Dolomist website provides a comprehensive day-by-day description of the activities included in the experience, the posts on *Dolomites for Beginners* aim at providing a broader overview of the experience, directing members to the official source for more detailed information. These highlights usually comprehend the most important mountains covered by the itinerary; in the case of the post in Figure 50, these are Marmolada, Sella Group and Catinaccio, along with the already-mentioned Pale di San Martino. Moreover, the content draws the attention to other additional distinctive features that are specific to this experience. In this particular experience, unique elements include hiking along World War I trails, tasting local cuisine and witnessing the phenomenon of the Enrosadira, namely the pink and orange glow that illuminates the Dolomites at sunset due to their distinctive geological composition. The fourth section of the post contains the call to action, directing members to click on the affiliate link. This aligns with the general practices of affiliate marketing. In fact, Adel (2023) argues that this type of marketing usually utilises backlinks to the tourism business's official website.

The last section of the post contains some images of the experience provided by the tourism business. The inclusion of images of the destination is crucial for two different reasons. As stated in Chapter 3 of this thesis, members tend to be attracted by posts that are accompanied by visual content, leading to higher levels of engagement. Adel (ibid.) further argues that visual content, such as high-quality images, allows affiliate marketers to showcase destinations and experiences in ways that allows tourists, or in this case

members of the Facebook group, to envision themselves there. This is mostly effective when images feature real people, with whom members can identify, as demonstrated in the post shown in Figure 51.

Figure 51: Post affiliation Dolomist n.2. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [May 27, 2025]

The post shown in Figure 51 serves as another example of how the affiliation between Dolomist and *Dolomites for Beginners* is implemented on Facebook. This specific post advertises a 3-day experience along a Via Ferrata in the Brenta Dolomites, located in the Trentino province. As it is clear from the post itself, the structure employed to describe the experience remains consistent, allowing members to immediately recognise it as part of a series of affiliate posts. In particular, this specific post focuses the attention of the reader on the inclusion of an English-speaking certified guide in the experience provided by Dolomist. This element aims at ensuring the quality of the product offered, aligning with the theory on the effectiveness of affiliation by Adel (ibid.).

Adel (ibid.) also highlights that affiliate marketers can achieve their aim of selling the tourism business' product or service by demonstrating social proof. Social proof is a business concept applied to the social media context according to which consumers usually seek recommendations from other individuals in order to find products and services (Arunkumar et al., 2023). Applying this to the realm of tourism, this concept suggests that tourists tend to purchase a specific product or service if other visitors have already experienced it and have shared positive testimonials or user-generated content on it (Adel, 2023). As this method has already proved successful, it can be applied to the case of Dolomist affiliation with *Dolomites for Beginners*, as shown in the example post of Figure 52.
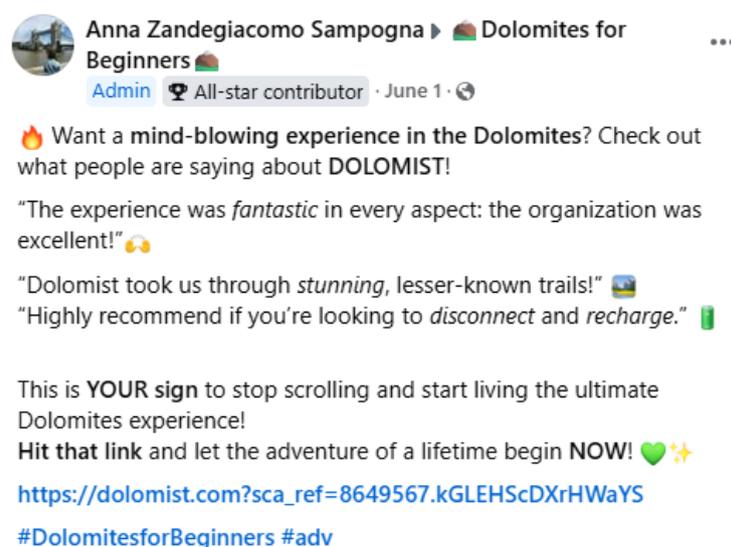
Figure 52: Post affiliation review Dolomist n.3. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna], [June 01, 2025]

The post provided in Figure 52 collects three reviews of past customers, which function as testimonials of the quality of the experiences provided by Dolomist. As in the previous examples, a call to action is used, followed by the affiliate link to the main website of Dolomist.

After outlining the affiliation with Dolomist in all its key characteristics, it is possible to demonstrate how this collaboration is consistent with the brand identity of *Dolomites for Beginners*, presented in the previous section through the use of the brand steering wheel framework. In terms of hard facts of the brand identity, the inclusion of travel support in the form of guides, detailed maps and 24/7 assistance aligns with one of the most important brand attributes of the Facebook group, namely the objective of helping first-comers to the Dolomites: these features of the product offered by Dolomist are crucial in enabling also unexperienced people to discover this area. Moreover, another attribute of the brand *Dolomites for Beginners* refers to the promotion of other destinations linked to slow and experiential tourism. This is coherent with the product offered by Dolomist, which includes authentic experiences where most of the itinerary is covered on foot in a longer timeframe, respecting in this way one of the guidelines of slow tourism, i.e., avoiding polluting means of transportation.

As one benefit provided by the brand *Dolomites for Beginners* is the time and accessibility of information, Dolomist appears a favourable partnership as it provides pre-planned itineraries where all parts of the experience, such as accommodation and transportation, are already organised by the business. In this regard, consumers do not have to browse multiple websites but only choose and book the experience that is most suited to their needs. Moreover, another important brand benefit of *Dolomites for Beginners* lies in its potential to make tourists feel welcomed and part of a community. This sense of welcoming and belonging is fostered by Dolomist as well. In fact, many tours organised by Dolomist are designed for groups rather than individuals, encouraging people to experience the Dolomites along with other visitors.

In terms of soft facts, it can be stated how an affiliation with Dolomist is coherent with the theory of Esch. In fact, the positive feelings that are evoked by the experiences offered by Dolomist are then transferred to the publisher of these products, i.e., the brand *Dolomites for Beginners*. This is evident considering brand tonalities. The personality

chosen to represent the brand is very similar to the one shared by the employees of Dolomist, namely young individuals who desire to help visitors connect with their home territory. This similarity in personality is evident also in the language used by both Dolomist and *Dolomites for Beginners*, which can be considered informal and friendly. Moreover, the relationship established by the brand between company and consumer, specifically that of a guide and a "beginner", aligns perfectly with the nature of Dolomist experiences where a real guide accompanies beginners on tour in the Dolomites.

Taking into consideration brand iconography, some elements of the multisensory approach of the brand *Dolomites for Beginners* can be found even in some features of Dolomist. Firstly, Dolomist uses photos and videos to appeal to the sense of sight and hearing as *Dolomites for Beginners* does. Secondly, the importance given to the sense of taste with local products and dishes is also prevalent in the experiences offered by Dolomist. All in all, it can be stated how the brand *Dolomites for Beginners* finds in Dolomist an opportunity to provide its members with experiences that perfectly align with the features of its brand. Considering the importance of this type of affiliation with Dolomist and its alignment with the brand *Dolomites for Beginners*, more affiliations with local businesses and organisations could potentially be established.

6.4. Future Opportunities for Brand Growth and Technological Integration

This last section provides insights on the initiatives that could allow *Dolomites for Beginners* to grow in the future, both as a brand and as a platform catering to first-time visitors to the Dolomites while maintaining its new purpose of mitigating overtourism in the Dolomitic area. Section 6.3.1. described the features of the affiliation of the Facebook group with the local business Dolomist underlining how this tourism organisation is perfectly coherent with the brand *Dolomites for Beginners*. This is mostly due to some similarities between the two entities. Firstly, both establishments were created by individuals born in the Dolomitic territory, whose main purpose is to allow visitors to easily and safely discover the Dolomites. Secondly, both brands adhere to similar values, focusing on promoting a form of tourism that allows for the preservation of the environment while supporting local communities.

However, *Dolomites for Beginners* could expand its impact and fulfil its mission of supporting newcomers to the Dolomites while mitigating overtourism by establishing additional affiliations with a broader reach and functionality. In order to achieve this aim, the platform *Travelpayouts* will be employed. Travelpayouts is a travel affiliate marketing platform, which connects more than 90 travel brands and over 300.000 content creators around the world, also called publishers (Travelpayouts, n.d.). More specifically, this affiliate platform enables publishers to promote travel brands, such as flights, hotels and activities, in their own project, i.e., a website, a social media page or YouTube channel (Travelpayouts, 2021). Publishers can earn money from this promotion: in fact, the platform employs a Cost Per Action model, in which publishers earn money when the affiliate link or the QR-Code provided by them are used to make a purchase or visit a brand's website. Each brand arranges the payment amount a publisher can earn from a purchase carried out with their affiliate link (Travelpayouts, 2021).

Taking all this into account, Travelpayouts offers benefits to three key categories within the tourism industry: publishers, who can recommend brands to their audience and receive compensation; travel brands, which can broaden their visibility; and travellers, who are able to easily find the most suitable option for their trips (ibid.). One of the travel brands represented in the platform is Tripadvisor. Founded in 2000 as an ordinary travel search engine, Tripadvisor has now evolved into one of the best-known travel brands thanks to its distinctive feature, namely the employment of user-generated content and data (Alaimo et al., 2020). The authors define Tripadvisor as a data service ecosystem in which users not only provide content in the form of reviews or ratings but also make purchases directly on the platform by comparing prices of various travel-related services such as hotels, restaurants, experiences and tours (ibid.). In this sense, travellers play a crucial role in affecting travel decisions of their peers through their own opinions on the platform.

Considering the specific features of Tripadvisor, *Dolomites for Beginners* has activated an affiliate relationship with the platform Tripadvisor. In fact, many similarities can be drawn between the two entities. As already underlined, Tripadvisor employs user-generated content on its platform. As an online Facebook community, *Dolomites for Beginners* is based on content produced by its members, who actively participate in content generation each day. Moreover, users of both platforms rely on information

provided by their peers during all steps of their trip, from pre-trip to post-trip stage. In this sense, both platforms enable the creation of a direct relationship between users.

Additionally, an affiliate relationship with Tripadvisor can become an opportunity through which different strategies employed in *Dolomites for Beginners* and described in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 could be combined. In this sense, itineraries of destinations aligned with the principles of alternative, slow or experiential tourism could be integrated with affiliate links to accommodation structures, dining options or organised experiences.

An example of this methodology can be found in Figure 53, which portrays a sample post connected to the affiliation with Tripadvisor.

Figure 53: Post for brand growth n.1. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna] (June 6, 2025)

In this post, a B&B option is suggested to the members of *Dolomites for Beginners*. The accommodation is located in Cibiana di Cadore, a town in the Belluno province that was described in Chapter 5 as a location for alternative tourism in the Dolomites. Providing a direct link to the Tripadvisor page for a lodging and dining option in Cibiana di Cadore represents a practical way to support members in implementing alternative tourism practices, effectively contributing to the mitigation of overtourism. Moreover, this sample post allows to create a connection between the strategies anchored to the Facebook environment that were presented in Chapter 5 and the strategies that broaden the reach of *Dolomites to Beginners* outside its virtual borders, as described in Chapter 6.

Figure 54 provides another sample post that can create connections between different strategies through the employment of an affiliate link with Tripadvisor, focusing in this case on strategies presented in Chapter 6, namely the ones that extend outside the border of Facebook. In this sense, the post shows how different strategies that expand the reach of *Dolomites for Beginners* outside its virtual borders can be combined in the future operations of the Facebook group and brand *Dolomites for Beginners*. In this particular post, Val di Funes, a slow tourism destination located in South Tyrol described in Chapter 6, is presented as a potential travel location focusing on the promotion of a local restaurant via the affiliate relationship with Tripadvisor on the Travelpayouts platform. The post begins by describing Val di Funes in general terms and then presents a dining option in the valley, namely the restaurant Pitzock. In particular, the post presents this establishment as a place where visitors can sample the local products from Val di Funes that have been recognised as Slow Food Presidia. In this way, the post appeals to tourists who travel to the Dolomites to live an authentic culinary experience. In order to support this experience, an affiliate link is included at the end of the post.

Figure 54: Post for brand growth n.2. Source: Facebook [Anna Zandegiacomo Sampogna] (June 14, 2025)

In the previous section, the affiliation with Dolomist was explained considering its consistencies with the brand *Dolomites for Beginners*. Taking into consideration an affiliation with a broader scope using Tripadvisor on the Travelpayouts platform, it is

important to underline how even this affiliation needs to be coherent with the brand *Dolomites for Beginners* in order to be accepted and be considered useful by the community. This can be achieved by choosing accommodation structures, dining options and experiences that align with the brand identity of the Facebook group and brand in all its facets. Considering the posts displayed in Figure 53 and Figure 54, it can be stated that the brand identity of *Dolomites for Beginners* is respected by the affiliate relationship with Tripadvisor. In fact, brand attributes are coherent as the Tripadvisor affiliate links enable to direct members towards specific locations and help them discover the Dolomites easily.

This leads to the brand benefit of time and accessibility of information. In fact, providing links to accommodation structures and dining options in the Dolomites simplifies the search and reservation process of members while also welcoming them in this mountain area. The brand tonality aligns in the way the posts employ the same personality, language and role of a friend that characterises *Dolomites for Beginners*.

The content of the posts allows to be coherent also with the brand iconography in the way it leverages on different senses to attract members, namely sight through the image of the lodging and dining facilities and taste through the description of local dishes available at the B&B Baita Deona and restaurant Pitzock. Overall, it can be stated that an affiliation with Tripadvisor that focuses on selected accommodation structures, restaurants or experiences appears as a beneficial future opportunity for the growth of the platform and of the brand *Dolomites for Beginners* while connecting different strategies to increase their potential to mitigate overtourism through their combined employment.

Additionally, Travelpayouts can be used to broaden the number of affiliate relationships to other programs represented in the platform, such as *GetYourGuide* and *Trip.com.*, in order to allow members to choose from a wider array of options in travel-related services. Moreover, an affiliate relationship was created on the platform with *Expedia US/CA* in order to cater mostly to users from the United States of America, which represent the 10% of all members, as discovered in the analysis in Chapter 3.

In order to increase the positive effects of *Dolomites for Beginners* in the future along with affiliations, a website could be developed. The importance of establishing a website connected to the Facebook group is stressed by the online platform

BusinessDasher, which specialises in providing data on how firms in different sectors can anticipate and deal with future trends in their own field (BusinessDasher, n.d.-a). According to this online platform (BusinessDasher, n.d.-b), building a website is crucial for businesses because it allows them to better connect with customers as it increases the brand's online presence and boosts business growth. In fact, they assert that small businesses equipped with a website grow two times faster than those lacking one. This is related to the fact that websites are instrumental in building trust with customers (ibid.). However, BusinessDasher also stresses how designing a website can present many challenges. Firstly, websites, particularly those of small businesses, are often vulnerable to hacking due to weak security measures and outdated systems. Secondly, websites need to be designed in order to be accessible to people with disabilities in order to comply with legal accessibility standards and be consulted by all users (ibid.).

Considering all insights provided by BusinessDasher, developing a website for *Dolomites for Beginners* represents both an opportunity and a challenge. However, the forecasted benefits granted by the website would allow *Dolomites for Beginners* to increase both its reach and trust with its members despite the possible issues with security and accessibility. Moreover, the advantages of the website could be further expanded by developing a chatbot connected to it. According to Gupta & Gupta (2022), a chatbot is a technology based on the advancement of artificial intelligence and machine learning that is able to simulate a conversation with a user on an application or a website.

Chatbots usually appear in the form of popups or virtual assistants on websites of businesses and platforms belonging to different sectors such as education, e-commerce and news. Notable examples are the virtual assistant Cortana by Microsoft or Siri by Apple. However, this tool is also employed by several other platforms such as Facebook, Messenger and Telegram. The authors (ibid.) claim that chatbots have become widespread also in the travelling sector due to the many benefits they grant. In fact, virtual assistants are able to answer users' queries at any time during the day, even during the weekends and at nighttime. Moreover, they are also able to provide personalised experiences in several languages to users, which is particularly relevant considering the multilingual audience of *Dolomites for Beginners*.

In this context, chatbots appear as an advantage for both businesses and users. On the one hand, businesses can employ virtual assistants to decrease costs of customer assistance and, in this way, improve productivity. On the other, users appear more satisfied with the offering of businesses' websites as they are able to get answers to their queries by saving time while actively engaging with the website or application. As in the case of websites, creating a chatbot presents challenges mostly due to the fact that they are still a fairly recent innovation and they can be developed using several techniques.

Considering all this, the website of *Dolomites for Beginners* could potentially employ a chatbot in order to enable members to have an immediate response to their queries. This would allow them to better deal with a variety of different situations they could encounter during their travel in the Dolomitic area. This could become particularly important for first-time comers to the Dolomites, who have already been described as the main target of this Facebook group. Moreover, the chatbot could be crucial in order to spread awareness quickly on issues connected to overtourism in this particular area.

Conclusions

This work of thesis presented an analysis of the phenomenon of overtourism and, in particular, how social media can be leveraged to mitigate it in a specific context, namely the area of the Dolomites. The case study of the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners* was considered, explaining how various strategies could be employed to transform it into a tool to effectively achieve this goal.

This work demonstrated that social media should be considered not only as one of the causes of overtourism, but also as a crucial part of its solution (Song & Wondirad, 2023). Social media could become an important instrument to mitigate this problem if they were correctly employed by users, administrators and stakeholders operating in the tourism sector. In fact, one of the benefits of social media is their ability to quickly and effectively reach a wider audience of people. In this regard, users can be informed about this critical issue and be educated on the behaviours they may adopt to mitigate their impacts on destinations, particularly those most affected by overtourism, such as the Dolomites (Tiwari et al, 2020).

This work of thesis proved how a Facebook group can become a meaningful entity with real consequences in the physical world if specific measures are taken. In fact, pages and groups established on this social network, as well as on other similar platforms, are not necessarily destined to remain confined to their original virtual environment, but have the potential to extend beyond it. This dynamic enables social media to expand their influence into the physical world, generating real consequences for three different categories, namely individuals, businesses and territories. Taking into consideration individuals, the real effects of social media on the physical environment are exemplified by the case study of *Dolomites for Beginners*, a Facebook group that became a tool to help thousands of tourists orienting their travel decisions, and who are now able to discover the Dolomites in a more authentic and meaningful way.

In the case of businesses, it can be argued that this Facebook group has undergone several developments since its creation in 2023, leading to the establishment of a brand perfectly embodying the foundational values of this online community. The creation of

this brand was instrumental in enabling *Dolomites for Beginners* to establish connections with organisations and businesses operating in the Dolomitic area (Buil et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the experience of the Facebook group *Dolomites for Beginners* demonstrated the important role academic institutions, specifically the University of Bergamo and partly the Hochschule Stralsund, can assume in the context of tourism systems and territories around the world. In fact, a Facebook group born as a project for an academic course has become an autonomous and successful entity. By using this case study, the thesis proved how universities can not only prepare students for their role in the tourism industry but directly act on the issues affecting the tourism sector around the world.

In order to fully leverage the potential of the concept of *Dolomites of Beginners*, more Facebook groups are going to be created in the upcoming academic year at the University of Bergamo. In fact, students enrolled in the Master's course *Planning and Management of Tourism Systems* are going to participate in the creation of another group "for Beginners", more specifically "*Alps for Beginners*", catering to international tourists travelling to the Italian Alps. This endeavour will be crucial in understanding if the experience of *Dolomites for Beginners* can be successfully replicated while ensuring that more visitors and territories can benefit from its values in the future.

An initial encouraging recognition of the work undertaken by the Facebook group is represented by the coverage of *Dolomites for Beginners* in the Italian national newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. In the article "Il nuovo turismo inventato dai social" (translated as "The new tourism invented by social media"), illustrated in Figure 55 and accessible via the link provided below, *Dolomites for Beginners* is presented as a unique and successful case demonstrating how social media can redirect tourism flows. Particular emphasis is placed on the new mission of the group, namely mitigating overtourism in the Dolomites, which constituted the central focus of this thesis and will be the group's core purpose for the next future.

Il nuovo turismo inventato dai social

Località, mete e mode
Così i «content creator» orientano le migrazioni
L'esperto: serve un piano, il fenomeno aumenterà

di **Carlotta Lombardo**

Se non ti sei scattato un selfie, è come se non ci fossi stato. Perché oggi, a guidare i flussi turistici, non sono più i cataloghi delle agenzie, ma gli influencer. Nell'era della documentazione visiva digitale, a disegnare le mappe del desiderio turistico sono infatti loro: i content creator, croce e delizia del turismo 2.0. Bersagliate da migliaia di visitatori sedotti dalla viralità dei loro contenuti, le mete da visitare sono quelle più «instagrammabili», degne cioè di essere fotografate e postate su Instagram. Riducendo così l'esperienza di viaggio in una lista di cose da spuntare e condividere. Il risultato? Un serpentone umano che si muove alla ricerca del video più spettacolare e dello scatto più ardito, ma anche luoghi un tempo sconosciuti che, da un giorno all'altro, si ritrovano invasi da frotte di turisti. Il fenomeno è noto anche come «TikTok tourism» e sta riscrivendo le regole dei viaggi, portando alla ribalta località inaspettate salite così all'attenzione globale.

Il segnale

È successo a fine gennaio a Roccaraso, tranquilla meta sciistica abruzzese invasa in un solo giorno da 10.000 persone e 220 autobus dopo un video su TikTok dell'influencer Rita De Crescenzo (1,7 milioni di follower). Succede ora, in questa folle estate governata dall'overtourism: il video e le immagini, virali sui social, delle migliaia di persone in fila alla stazione intermedia Furnes, a Ortisei, per salire sul Seceda alla ricerca della foto perfetta sullo sfondo delle Odle ha fatto il giro del mondo. La medaglia, è la foto da esibire sul social. Autobus sovraffollati per l'Alpe di Siusi, frotte di turisti al lago di Carezza, a quello di Braies (561 mila post Instagram) o al Sorapis (47.300 post e fino a 3 mila persone sul posto al giorno), il bacino indaco di Cortina d'Ampezzo che, con quell'azzurro glaciale, soddisfa in un click la fame insaziabile di «luoghi da vedere». Invece che da vivere. È un caso il successo di «Dolomites for Beginners», la comunità online creata da Anna Zandegiacomo, studentessa 24enne cadorina di Planning and Management of Tourism Systems, a Bergamo, che indirizza i turisti principianti in visita sulle Dolomiti. Nata a fine 2023, oggi conta 239.305 membri ma tra questi, sull'onda del successo del portale, ora c'è anche chi promuove i propri servizi. «Sì, è vero. Alcuni fotografi propongono photo shooting per matrimoni tra le vette — puntualizza —, ma su Dolomites for Beginners si trovano soprattutto consigli su camminate facili e dritte per raggiungere i posti. Ora sto lavorando al tema della mitigazione dell'overtourism e presto ci saranno anche percorsi alternativi poco affollati».

Il profilo

Anna Zandegiacomo, studentessa 24enne a Bergamo, indirizza i turisti principianti in visita sulle Dolomiti

È la fondatrice di «Dolomites for Beginners», la comunità online nata alla fine del 2023, e che oggi conta 239.305 membri. Tra questi, sull'onda del successo del portale, c'è anche chi promuove i propri servizi

«Alcuni fotografi propongono photo shooting per matrimoni tra le vette» — spiega Anna —. Ora sto lavorando sul caso overtourism e presto ci saranno anche percorsi alternativi

Il caso Nella pagina «Dolomites for Beginners» ci sono artisti che propongono servizi. «Sono un fotografo di fughe d'amore che visiterà le Dolomiti presto — si legge — cerco una giovane coppia che voglia posare per un servizio fotografico romantico»

Trento Nella foto la Baita Friedrich August, sul Col Rodella, con un bancone di krapfen da mangiare con vista sulle Dolomiti. Location virale grazie al reel (da oltre 300 mila like su Instagram) dell'influencer Sonia Peronaci

Belluno Il Lago di Sorapis ha un colore turchese dovuto una polvere rocciosa, nota come «farina di roccia», che deriva dall'erosione del ghiacciaio che rilascia microscopiche particelle nell'acqua. È una delle mete più gettonate

Bologna Nella foto la storica finestrella di via Piella. In passato era tra i segreti meglio custoditi della città, un romantico affaccio sul Canale delle Moline. Oggi, grazie al social network, è diventata una meta virale

I numeri

Nel turismo ridotto a performance digitale, ipertrofia dell'overtourism, il podio spetta poi alle località di mare: le falesie candide della Scala dei Turchi, in Sicilia (262.568 post Instagram e quasi 5000 su TikTok), Punta Prosciutto, nel Salento (87.600 post Instagram e 8000 su TikTok), i trulli fiabeschi di Alberobello, in Puglia (5 mila). Le immagini di questi giorni delle centinaia di persone appiccicate le une alle altre nelle più belle spiagge della Sardegna fanno venire i brividi e, di certo, il titolo di «spiaggia più bella del mondo» che il World's 50 Best Beaches ha attribuito quest'anno a Cala Goloritzé, nel Golfo di Orosel, ha fatto schiz-

262
Migliaia di post
Il podio Instagram spetta alla Scala dei Turchi e alle sue rocce bianche in Sicilia. Su TikTok sono 5000

220
Gli autobus a Roccaraso
La «chiamata» social portò lo scorso inverno nella località sciistica circa 10 mila persone

zare l'algoritmo del post e il corto circuito emozionale (83.834 post, come per la vicina Cala Mariolu).

Non solo natura

Amate il buon cibo? Sappiate che i krapfen più virali dell'estate sono a Baita Friedrich August, sul Col Rodella: un bancone infinito carico di bomboloni con vista mozzafiato sulle Dolomiti. Famosissimi, grazie al reel (oltre 300 mila su Instagram) dell'influencer Sonia Peronaci, fondatrice di Giallozafferano, anche i croissant cubici della Farmacia del cambio a Torino e, a Milano, i dolci da forno di «Signor Lievito» (la coda ormai è inevitabile). A Bologna, la finestrella di via Piella era tra i segreti meglio custoditi della città, un romantico affaccio sul Canale delle Moline... oggi è virale. Anche quella. Scrive Louiskoby, su Instagram: «Questa finestra nascosta è diventata virale per la sua bellezza. Non c'è molto da vedere, ma ho potuto fare questo video!». Probabilmente lo stesso, identico, postato da tutti e visto milioni di volte: stesso angolo, stessa posa. Nient'altro.

L'analisi

«In realtà questa fluidità spinta dai social si posa su una posizione rigida: la domanda turistica continua a concentrarsi sugli stessi luoghi iconici del grand tour» osserva Jan Van Der Borg, professore di Economia e Politica del Turismo all'Università di Venezia. «Il risultato è paradossale: un'enorme staticità globale della domanda e, dentro questa, la fluidità di mode che si accendono e si spengono in poche settimane. Basta un video virale per spostare folle di visitatori, creando disagi notevoli a chi abita e a chi vorrebbe vivere i luoghi in modo tranquillo. Ma i problemi strutturali restano, e con l'intelligenza artificiale la velocità del passaparola rischia di accentuarsi ancora di più».

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Il sindaco di Ortisei

«Per salvare il territorio accessi limitati»

Sindaco Tobia Moroder, primo cittadino di Ortisei (Bolzano)

Il caso del tornello sul monte Seceda è stato esempio in Alto Adige di un nuovo modello turistico. Il flusso dei visitatori verso mete ben precise è in costante aumento, ma le prenotazioni degli alberghi restano nella media.

Sindaco Moroder, per questo «turismo da selfie» il contingentamento delle visite è l'unica soluzione percorribile?

«Ci dispiace limitare l'accesso a un patrimonio naturale, ma sembra anche il modo più efficace per preservarlo. Diluire i flussi con le prenotazioni permetterà ai turisti di vivere un'esperienza più piacevole, senza lunghe code, e alla montagna di non essere maltrattata».

Magari premiando chi sceglie di soggiornare?

«Assolutamente. Vogliamo promuovere un turismo che si confronti con la storia e la cultura locale. Stiamo elaborando un sistema di corsie preferenziali per i residenti e per chi trascorre qualche giorno nelle nostre strutture ricettive. Devono ricevere un trattamento diverso rispetto a chi sale in quota, scatta due fotografie e riprende la macchina poco dopo».

Il modello da seguire potrebbe essere quello del vicino lago di Braies?

«Valutiamo la possibilità di un parcheggio di interscambio, magari nella vicina frazione di Pontives, con servizio shuttle per raggiungere le mete più inflazionate, come il Seceda, per distinguere i flussi giornalieri da quelli che non lo sono. Ci sembra un modello replicabile anche altrove».

Lorenzo Nicolao
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Figure 55: Newspaper Article on Dolomites for Beginners (August 26, 2025)
https://www.corriere.it/cronache/25_agosto_25/localita-mete-e-mode-il-nuovo-turismo-inventato-dai-social-i-content-creator-orientano-le-migrazioni-bf662eea-8a56-43db-a971-960469626xlk.shtml

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