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DESTINATION
BRAND AMBASSADORS
IN THE MAKING:

ACCULTURATION AND THE INTERNATIONAL

STUDENT EXCHANGE

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DESTINATION BRAND AMBASSADORS IN THE MAKING:

ACCULTURATION AND THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXCHANGE

CRISTINA MICHELINI

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

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CRISTINA MICHELINI

Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to understand how the formation of a destination ambassador unfolds in the context of a student exchange in Hong Kong. The researcher implemented a qualitative longitudinal study that captures the process of ambassadorship while it is occurring and uncovers how exchange students build images and convey and transmit messages about the study destination to their audience(s). Ambassadorship is hereby understood as communication about the destination experience, and it is investigated in both its verbal and pictorial form, through in-depth face-to-face interviews and analysis of social media visual materials respectively. Given the long-term and immersive nature of the student exchange, the researcher employed the acculturation theoretical framework to the reading of students' experience narrative. The aim is for the researcher to investigate the relations between issues related to adjustment, the relationship established with the place and the kind of message that is transmitted about the destination Hong Kong. The results of the research provide a deeper and more structured understanding of an instance of long-term tourist destination ambassadorship and potentially offer Hong Kong destination and education managers with insights relevant to how, when and through which tools to leverage on exchange students promotional potential.

Most research on international students focusses on the Western Countries context. This study's first contribution consists in extending it to the Asia-Pacific region and to consider an instance of Asian cities leveraging on the international higher education market for their development. Secondly, previous studies on brand ambassadorship have investigated predominantly its antecedents and motivations, while this research intends to contribute to the scant investigation on how the process of ambassadors in the making unfolds as the tourist experience occurs. Third, although the potential of international (and exchange) students as ambassadors for the destination seems to be a relatively well understood practice from the point of view of place marketing and higher education institutions, to the researcher's knowledge this issue has not been looked at from a tourism research point of view. Similarly, consumer generated content and brand ambassadorship is widely used in practice across different industries, but seems to have undergone little investigation in the tourism context, in particular with regard to visual social media. The latter point is particularly relevant given the highly visual nature of the tourist experience. Therefore the researcher wishes to fill the gap by investigating the exchange student population through a destination marketing lens. Finally, this study investigates the links between the exchange students' acculturation process and the processes of destination brand image formation; brand ambassadorship formation; and narratives, story-telling and WOM formation and transmission. The present study's introduction of acculturation as an influencing force on brand ambassadorship formation is novel, besides being a relatively scantly investigated topic with relation to tourism in general.

DEDICATION

For my parents, Nadezda and Augusto, who have worked hard for me their whole lives, watched me go to the other side of the world and supported me through this journey.

For my brother, Martin, who has just embarked in the same adventure, also far from home. Thank you for being my best friend and confiant.

For my friends.

Cristina, who pushed me, cheered me up and and believed in me unconditionally, even when I couldn't.

Lisa, who always encourages me to spice things up and dream bigger.

And Sara, who has been by my side for twenty years and I trust with my life.

I hope they know how grateful I am and how much I miss them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1   <u>Introduction</u>

The inspiration for this study has been twofold, personal and conceptual. On the one hand, the investigation was inspired by the researcher's own life experience as an international student. The research purpose also extends to how the globalization of higher education is impacting on tourism destinations. In discussions about the various consequences of globalization, frequent mention has been made about how new technologies are changing higher education and communication practices. The changes to both from globalization can affect destination promotion in several ways, and these will be thoroughly discussed in this research.

In this introduction to the thesis, the researcher discusses how her personal experience as an international student inspired her to undertake the research. During her masters level graduate studies, she had the opportunity to spend three entire semesters in different European countries attending local higher education institutions. Each semester was a liminal experience and addressed something sought after by her (Millennial) generation: FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). This prompted her to make the most of each destination during the periods spent abroad. She also found herself acting out another typically Millennial mantra: YOLO (You Only Live Once). The readiness to explore unfamiliar environments and the thirst to try new things was reinforced not only by overseas study, but also by the idea that each semester abroad represented an unmissable opportunity. Given the purported purpose of her course of enrolment as an Erasmus Mundus student, funded and supported by the European Union, the researcher felt that learning, exploring, experimenting and challenging herself were both an opportunity and a responsibility.

At the conclusion of this important life experience, the researcher reviewed her various social media posts, videos, and photographs. She also revisited conversations about the places that she had visited with friends and family back home or in other countries.

Three main things stood out. Firstly, she felt a strong emotional connection to each of the places where she had lived through her studies, including one where her impression was not positive. Secondly, the realisation that by recounting her overseas experience, she advanced a narrative that resonated with her friends and family and was both welcomed and trusted. Thirdly, revisiting the various stories with her audience made her realise that the narrative had changed over time and over the course of her stay abroad. Finally, the realisation that these destinations would always hold a special place in the researcher's heart made her question how this had occurred. How was the story constructed about these various places? How did it change over time? She also realised quickly that she had collected first-hand experiences that have potential for promoting tourist destinations.

The idea that individuals who are strongly connected with a place are potentially its best spokespersons has been widely discussed in the academic literature. Many Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) have engaged with this concept and have formed ambassador networks or have built associations between KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders), social media influencers or celebrities in general, and a place. The place brand management literature suggests that people with a "real or perceived connection" (Andersson & Ekman, 2009, p. 42) can promote place images and contribute to developing its reputation, therefore acting as destination ambassadors (Andersson & Ekman, 2009; Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013). First-person visitor accounts are recognized as informative and trusted sources of destination-related information, and market reach can be extended to this group online and at minimal cost (Sahin & Baloglu, 2014).

Millennials can play an important role in promoting destinations because of their defining characteristics. To them, 'experiences' trump 'things' and they are increasingly eager to consume real-life experiences, on which they spend a growing amount of their time and money. In some respects they have redefined the concept of consumerism and epitomise the emergence of the so-called experience economy. For this generation, living a meaningful, happy life is about creating, sharing and capturing memories earned through experiences, rather than about possessions or career status (Eventbrite, 2016). Destinations will need to change their marketing approaches in addressing such interests if they are to respond to the demands of the sharing and experience economies. Destination marketing has already been turning towards emotional appeals (Li, Walters, Packer, & Scott, 2016) and to engendering emotional connections (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2015). Experiences are often about identity creation and escapism for Millennials, though they are also about fulfilling a desire for deep human connection (Eventbrite, 2017). Therefore, the researcher asked herself about the construction of emotional connections with destinations. How do such connections unfold and progressively reflect the advancement of destinations by visitors?

The present study investigates these aforementioned issues. It draws upon Hong Kong as a destination to explore the promotional value to the personal accounts that are advanced by exchange students who have experienced a particular destination. The researcher draws upon exchange students as a representative group of Millennial travellers and views them as potential ambassadors, namely spokespersons, for a destination. The main goal of the study is to uncover the connection between the unfolding of such experience and the associated narratives. To understand this connection, the researcher incorporates the concept of acculturation, and explores its influences on destination ambassadorship and its implications for destination marketing.

She has adopted acculturation as an innovative approach in tourism research – namely the investigation of how exchange students adjust to Hong Kong. There is recognition amongst scholars that tourists and international students undergo a similar process of acculturation to their destination (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014; Bochner, 2006; Rasmi, Ng, Lee, & Soutar, 2014; Rasmi, Safdar, & Lewis, 2009). However, to the author's awareness no previous investigation has explored how such process affects communications about the destination experience. The researcher adopts the concept of brand relationship to understand the connection between the process of acculturation and becoming an ambassador for Hong Kong. Previous researchers have claimed that a place name is a brand name and may elicit audience perceptions about reputation (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). If the name of a destination may be viewed as synonymous with the destination brand, the principles of brand relationship may be applied to destinations. The author will explore how such relationships with a destination are established through the acculturation process.

The study adopts a constructivist approach which views reality as constructed. Such constructions are based on assumptions, on previous experiences and on the contingent realities with which they interact. This perceived need to capture such contingent realities motivated the researcher to adopt a longitudinal and qualitative method of data collection. The commonly prevailing research that depends on the collection of one-off data has a limited capacity to capture evolving contexts. The adoption of a longitudinal approach allows the researcher to re-examine contingencies and investigating changing realities. Finally, the thesis addresses the need for tourism researchers to adopt non-representational approaches to address the close emotional connection between Millennials and destination brands. By conducting a detailed analysis of the compositional elements of online photographs, the researcher will capture gestures that are outside individual consciousness and unlock emotional connections to the destination. The methodology is faithful to the constructivist

4

approach by adopting a relativist ontology that emphasises the situatedness of contingent realities.

The research starts from the observation that personal networks can engender the emotional connections with a destination and its brand. It also considers the formation of such personal connections through communication technologies generally and particularly through social media. New patterns of consumer behaviour have emerged based on access to mobile networks and data, resulting in greater transparency and consumer engagement (Schwab, 2016). Millennials are the first generation of "digital natives", characterised by permanent connectivity to the Internet and to their peers (Goldman Sachs, 2018). They attach high importance to speed of access to information and feedback (Veiga, Custódio Santos, Águas, & Santos, 2017, p. 606). The researcher also acknowledges the vital role of social media in consumption and the research is inspired by how the continuous connectivity of Millennials can be leveraged for purposes of destination promotion. The researcher will give particular attention to how this occurs by understanding content that is produced by Millennial travellers.

Strong dependence amongst Millennials on their mobile applications (or "apps") and on social networks encourages communication about their experiences through digital storytelling (Bernardi, 2018). Accounts of destination experiences can be thought of as consumer reports on the use of products and service brands (Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007). As products and service brands, destination experiences play an important role in traveller identity-constructions. Therefore, destination marketing should focus on advancing lifestyles and on constructing personas with which travellers identify.

Student travellers offer promise for the advancement of destination ambassadorship. This cohort selects destinations on the basis of word-of-mouth communications and personal recommendations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). They also display similar social and social

media behaviours. Finally they represent visitors who form emotional connections with the destination thanks to their motivation: "the desire to experience other cultures, build life experience, and/or benefit from formal or informal learning opportunities outside [their] usual environment" (WYSE, 2011, p. 16). Those undertaking higher education are arguably the most resilient of the wider youth and student travel group and are turning their attention towards less traditional Asian destinations, notably China (WYSE, 2011). This has prompted the researcher to investigate a particular international student cohort. The study addresses exchange students and their potential as destination brand ambassadors. The researcher views exchange students as prospective contributors to the formation of organic destination images. Therefore, the study observes what may be described as "the process of destination ambassadorship". The word process is used because of the extended nature of the time period.

The expression destination brand ambassadorship is defined as

"the active advancing into the external environment of communication about the destination experience and the associated lifestyle. It is an unsolicited and proactive behaviour that takes the form of verbal or visual narrative, either in person or online."

The researcher investigates how exchange students navigate their study destination. It is believed that respondent accounts of interactions with the destination and with the local population will help to explain their acculturation to Hong Kong. Through an understanding of acculturation, the researcher can investigate how exchange students progressively form a brand relationship and accumulate experiences that impact on their behaviours as prospective destination brand ambassadors. The terms narrative, story and account will be used interchangeably. Each of these terms refers to the human experience that provides structure for our meanings in the social world and that emerges from circumstances and social interactions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The researcher has opted to give consideration to

both verbal and visual narratives. For the scope of this study, visual narrative is interpreted as the communication advanced by means of images, such as photographs, through social media.

As was mentioned previously, the adoption of an acculturation approach is novel in tourism. Exchange students undergo an acculturation process and this describes a change which occurs through intercultural contacts and includes both a process and an outcome of negotiating the retention of one's own and the adoption of the host culture (Berry, 2006; Sam, 2006). Acculturation is often initiated by experiences involving relatively prolonged though temporary exposure to another culture and displacement from the usual environment (Brown, 2009; Sam, 2006).

During their stay abroad, exchange students engage in rituals, repeated interactions and continuous encounters with and within the space and society of the destination. In aggregate these constitute their relationship with the destination. Paralleling the experience of consumers who enter into brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Hankinson, 2004) and can report their use, exchange students also acquire destination experience. They have the capacity to act as destination ambassadors through various mediums of external communication, whether social media or face-to-face.

As it will be discussed in the subsequent literature review, the brand ambassador behaviours of exchange students resemble those of corporates' internal stakeholders and customers. Hence the researcher will draw upon research on these. In their roles as both temporary residents and as tourists, exchange students are sometimes external and sometimes internal destination stakeholders. In some senses international students engage in a process of creating a new "home away from home": they build local social networks during their experience while maintaining home networks through social media (Wu & Wilkes, 2017). Though acknowledging that the impacts are context dependent, the concepts of both

consumer and corporate brand ambassadorships may be applicable to exchange students with potential implications of the wider tourism sector.

This thesis will focus on areas that, to her knowledge, have not been previously explored. The researcher will discuss the main trends of ambassadorship of Hong Kong on the part of the exchange students. In particular, she will explore the evolution of destination ambassadorship in the context of Hong Kong, as visitors feel progressively more *native* to Hong Kong. The emotional appeal of the communication that is advanced throughout the experience is evidenced through compositional aspects of shared photographs. Another aspect of interest is whether negative aspects of narrative are acknowledged. It will be discussed how this occurs, contingent with certain events and stages of the experience.

By incorporating the concepts of acculturation, brand relationship and brand ambassadorship the researcher will analyse the complexity of meaning-making that surrounds destination related communications. The researcher also explores brand identification. While many marketing practitioners are familiar with the idea of brand-identity congruity and consumer behaviours guided by *buyer personas*, the researcher will later discuss the search to affirm such identities and whether this permeates the destination experience and subsequent ambassadorship.

A comprehensive literature review will be conducted to foreshadow the development of a conceptual framework for exchange student destination brand ambassadorships. It incorporates sections on customer- and employee-based brand ambassadorships, on destination brand ambassadorships, and on the acculturation of exchange students. The researcher will then propose a conceptual framework to explain the exchange student experience as a process. She will then conduct another analysis based on the three aforementioned domains. This will provide readers with insights about how exchange

students undergo a process of acculturation to Hong Kong's reality, develop a relationship with Hong Kong as a place and are transformed into destination ambassadors.

1.1 Research purpose, questions and objectives

1.1.1 Purpose

The main purpose of this research is to understand *how* the formation of destination brand ambassadorship unfolds for exchange students in Hong Kong through the course of a semester in the destination.

The formation of a brand ambassador is viewed as a process consisting of a series of actions and changes. The researcher will explore how these are experienced by exchange students. Since the object of the research is in a constant process of change, the investigator with deploy qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR), rather than one-off data collection (Hughes & Emmel, 2012; Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014).

1.1.2 Research question

The following question is addressed:

"How does an exchange student become a *destination brand ambassador* during the period of exchange?"

1.1.3 Objectives

The following research objectives are proposed:

- To understand *how* brand ambassadorships unfolds through exchange visits. This is achieved by understanding

    o *how* exchange students develop a relationship with the destination;

    o *how* the process of exchange student acculturation evolves;

- *how* exchange student destination ambassadorship is transformed through the development of a relationship with the destination and while undergoing an acculturation process;

The researcher uses the concepts of acculturation and destination relationship to explain:

- *whether* and if so *how* exchange students embrace destination ambassadorship;

- what communications about Hong Kong are advanced through destination ambassadorship;

- *why* certain forms of communication about Hong Kong are advanced through destination ambassadorship.

2   <u>Literature review</u>

The researcher starts the literature review by providing some context for the study. For this purpose, she discusses the phenomenon of international higher education and its implications for tourism. In particular, the researcher introduces the reader to the population of the study by defining the international student exchange.

The following sections provide an overview of previous research in the three domains of acculturation, brand relationship and brand ambassadorship). This provides scene setting for the study and defines the terms that appear in the conceptual framework.

2.1   International education, tourism and student exchange

Prior to investigating destination brand ambassadorship and its evolution amongst exchange students, it is imperative to understand this cohort and why it is relevant to the destination from a tourism perspective. As the Asia-Pacific region competes in the global knowledge-based economy, cities such as Hong Kong are seeking to promote themselves as international innovation hubs by enticing foreign students and talent (British Council, 2014, p. 91). This prompts the pursuit of high rankings for their institutions on global university league tables (Mok, 2007). Ranking surveys consistently regard international student numbers as an indicator of institutional competitiveness (Shin & Harman, 2009). A country's ability to attract foreign students depends on awareness amongst foreign students, its reputation and positive word-of-mouth communication (hereinafter WOM) and the willingness of former students to provide personal recommendations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

A significant body of tourism research has recognized the linkages between international education and tourism and the importance of international students for both educational institutions and for tourism (Bywater, 1993; Chadee & Cutler, 1996; King, 2015; Richards & Wilson, 2003; Ritchie, Carr, & Cooper, 2003; WYSE, 2011). International

students are likely to recommend the destination to other prospects and rely heavily on recommendations from friends and relatives to gather information about the study destination and to learn where to travel during their period of residence (Michael, Armstrong, & King, 2003). International students contribute directly to tourism destinations by undertaking trips during the period of their studies or by attracting visiting friends and relatives (VFRs) (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Michael et al., 2003). They also develop an experience-based attachment to the destination, thereby leading to WOM and intentions to recommend (Chen, Dwyer, & Firth, 2015).

The World Youth, Student and Educational Travel Confederation (hereinafter WYSE) has defined international student mobility as a distinct phenomenon, namely the "youth and student travel industry". This includes "all independent trips of periods of less than one year by people aged 16-29 which are motivated, in part or full, by a desire to experience other cultures, build life experience, and/or benefit from formal or informal learning opportunities outside one's usual environment" (WYSE, 2011, p. 16). WYSE (2011) characterises higher education as one various youth and student travel market; as highly resilient during economic downturns; and as witnessing a shift within the traditional destination markets towards non-traditional destinations such as China. In light of these considerations, it is timely to examine the impacts of international students on the wider economy and on tourism.

As the prominence of the Asia-Pacific region grows, countries of the region are acknowledging the importance of an internationalizing education system (British Council, 2014; UNESCO, 2013). The establishment of agreements between foreign institutions for exchange programs and joint degrees is one consequence of such internationalization (Mok, 2007; Shin & Harman, 2009).

Mobility programs are being promoted by both nations and by higher education institutions through mechanisms such as study abroad grants, agreements and exchange

programs (Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget, & Pawlowska, 2012). Students are increasingly preparing themselves for international careers by acquiring a global education, learning new languages, becoming familiar with different cultures and customs and extending their social networks (Rodríguez et al., 2012). Cross-border educational mobilities are on the rise and the education marketplace is expanding as travel between countries is becoming increasingly easy and affordable (OECD, 2013). According to Rodríguez et al. (2012) the economic impact of such demographic movements on host cities is comparable to that of conventional mass tourism. On this basis, student international mobilities can be understood as a manifestation of the tourism phenomenon.

Given a clear preference amongst prospective students for education that is delivered in English, flows have traditionally been oriented towards countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia (UNESCO, 2013; WYSE, 2011). Although Europe is the biggest host region for foreign students amongst the OECD countries and North America attracts most Asian foreign students (OECD, 2009), it is evident that this pattern is evolving. Governments across Asia are improving and expanding their local higher education supply (UNESCO, 2013; WYSE, 2011). The Asia-Pacific region is enticing a growing number of foreign students through government endorsement of intra-regional mobilities (OECD, 2009; UNESCO, 2013).

2.1.1   International students and exchange students

International students may be defined as people who move away from their country of normal residence with the intention to carry out either part or the whole of their degree and who will return home after graduation (Carr & Axelsen, 2009). Scholars have tended to use the terms international students and exchange students interchangeably (Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007; Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009). Conceptually, exchange students are a sub-group of international students, who are credit- rather than degree-seeking (IAU, 2015).

Exchange students are commonly excluded from statistical data about internationally mobile students, thereby leading to the under-reporting of their mobilities (UOE, 2014). This has occurred because a) the international exchange occurs in the framework of on-going studies at the "home institution", b) exchange students receive credit at their home institution; and c) enrolments are attributed to the country of their home university (EUROSTAT, 2015b). Previous research has differentiated them from international students on grounds of their resemblance to an "institutional migration", whereby the destination choice is limited to the set of agreements with foreign institutions by the home institution (Beine, Noël, & Ragot, 2014).

In the case of Hong Kong the University Grants Committee (UGC) offers the researcher an opportunity to retrieve customized data regarding this specific population. The UGC distinguishes between inbound exchange and visiting students on one hand and non-local student enrolments on the other (UGC, 2015). The present study adopts the Hong Kong's University Grants Committee approach with ESs being treated as a sub-group of international students. The researcher will draw upon the international student literature while acknowledging differences in terms of permanence and objectives of their experiences in the host study destination.

2.1.2   Exchange students and tourists

The tourism literature has paid little attention to student exchanges as a tourism related phenomenon (Rodríguez et al., 2012). Ritchie et al. (2003) defined educational tourists as travellers for whom education and learning are the primary or secondary elements of the trip. Recent researchers have used the term "international academic tourism" to describe the travel related activities undertaken by higher education exchange students (Bento, 2014; Rodríguez et al., 2012). International academic tourism encompasses periods spent at higher education institutions outside one's usual environment for less than a year (Rodríguez et al., 2012).

In considering their potential relative to domestic tourists, it has been found they demonstrate a willingness to explore the country because of their substantial availability of free time and because of the liminality of their experience (Gardiner, King, & Wilkins, 2013). This observation may also apply to exchange students. Relative to international students their stays may be briefer, but relative to the average tourist their impact may be greater since they stay longer (Rodríguez et al., 2012). Freestone and Geldens (2008) work is a notable example of research about the student exchange as a tourist experience. These authors concluded that exchange students view themselves differently from "commercial" or "mainstream" tourists because they believe their experience is more authentic.

All of the above suggests that there are several reasons why international students merit separate consideration from other tourist segments such as backpackers, youth travellers, leisure and business tourists. These include funding sources, lifestyles and existing academic commitments (Gardiner et al., 2013; King, 2015).

The touristic component of the student exchange has also been emphasised in recent research on the discourse used by higher education institutions to promote study abroad experiences. The websites of higher education institutions seek to gain leverage from the presumed desire amongst students for leisure and relaxation to promote study abroad. Such websites appeal by usingof words that convey meanings associated with education and learning, against the backdrop of images that recall relaxation, hedonism and happiness (Michelson & Álvarez Valencia, 2016).

A recent paper defined student mobilities as a separate tourism phenomenon - Global Educational Travel (GET). GET consists of "all overseas travel undertaken by enrolled undergraduate students for the purpose of study, and the global competencies (values, identity and knowledge) related to global citizenship, security and international relations,

student engagement and work adaptability that stem from it" (Grabowski, Wearing, Lyons, Tarrant, & Landon, 2017, p. 139).

2.1.3   Exchange students and length of stay

In the following section the researcher will examine exchange students as both tourists and temporary residents.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism as trips undertaken by individuals to a destination for less than a year and that include an overnight stay, for any purpose other than seeking or receiving employment (UNWTO, 2014). In the context of data collection for tourism statistics students "taking short-term courses (less than one year) are visitors" (UNWTO, 2008, pp. 20-21). ESs stay in the host country for less than a year. Their reasons for travel differ from employment and, like most tourists, they spend money that originates outside the destination, thereby causing a multiplier effect on destination economies (Roppolo, 1996).

Most youth travellers to Hong Kong stay between one and seven nights (Nok, Suntikul, Agyeiwaah, & Tolkach, 2017). Compared to other youth travellers, ESs to Hong Kong stay much longer, which allows them to become more familiar with the place. The fact that the typical duration of the student exchange significantly exceeds the length of stay of the average tourist (Rodríguez et al., 2012) reinforces the view that their social and economic impacts are potentially significant (Brown, 2009; Nyaupane, Paris, & Teye, 2011). According to EUROSTAT long tourism trips are at least four overnight stays long (EUROSTAT, 2015a). ESs and long stay tourists are willing to adjust to the culture prevalent in the destination and to acquire culture specific knowledge through the course of the experience (Brown, 2009; Freestone & Geldens, 2008). This explains ESs in the context of the literature on longer-term travel and captures their similarities with longer stay tourists (Freestone & Geldens, 2008). Besides the potential contribution that ESs can make to the host country

through the purchase of accommodation, food, travel and leisure (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; UNESCO, 2013), they resemble international students in their enthusiasm to capitalise on travel opportunities during their period overseas (Michael et al., 2003).

Compared with international students, the perspective of ESs is more time constrained. This may sensitize them to the transience of the experience. A predetermination to return home is a prerequisite for the student exchange experience (Carr & Axelsen, 2009). By definition, ESs undertake only a portion of their studies overseas, typically for one or two semesters and for less than a year (Freestone & Geldens, 2008). Based on the temporariness of their stay overseas, the researcher argues that ES communications about the destination are ascribable to their experiences as both tourists and as temporary residents. It has previously been argued that international education is a form of temporary migration (King & Gardiner, 2014). As it will be discussed later when exploring the acculturation literature, such temporariness could encourage the establishment of an emotional attachment to the destination.

Cubillo, Sánchez, and Cerviño (2006) pointed out that international students are not only consumers of services offered by a University, but also by destinations, and Rodríguez et al. (2012) argue that ES consumer patterns are more akin to those of residents in the destination rather than to those of conventional tourists. This is exemplified, among others, by their choices of accommodation type, which mostly involve apartments, dorms, host-families, and university housing, thereby distinct from conventional tourist accommodation options. Furthermore, ESs are often required by public authorities in the study destination to acquire temporary residence for the duration of the exchange. Hong Kong ESs who are staying more than 180 days (six months circa) should apply for a Hong Kong Identity Card within 30 days of their arrival, which makes the card holder a non-permanent resident with no right to adobe in the administrative region (Immigration Department, 2015).

The second argument that supports the interpretation of the student exchange as a temporary residence is that the length of stay is sufficient to confront students with challenges of adjustment that are commonplace in the acculturation of immigrants. In fact, acculturation strategies developed around the immigrant experience have helped to explain the adjustment of international students to the study destination (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2007). In particular, in the following sections on acculturation, the researcher will discuss how ESs can be viewed as a particular immigrant sub-set that takes up residence in the host country temporarily and for a set purpose (Berry, 2006). The researcher will then explain how ESs fit into two out of the three categories of sojourners that have been theorized by Bochner (2006), namely tourists and overseas students. It will be explained in the proposed acculturation framework that ESs also face the adjustments that confront sojourners. The fact that ESs comprise a category of temporary resident within the literature also provides a basis for understanding how concepts of resident and citizen destination brand ambassadorship may be applied to this population.

2.1.4   Exchange student motivations

ESs generally travel to the host country to attend a university that has a partnership with their home educational institution and to continue their academic career by gaining credits abroad (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). They have been described as *Education First Tourists,* because education is their primary travel motivation (Ritchie et al., 2003). Some authors have however argued that decisions to embark on exchange programs are not driven exclusively by personal and professional development, but also by escapism that can be achieved by experiencing a different living environment (Juvan & Lesjak, 2011; Lesjak, Juvan, Ineson, Yap, & Axelsson, 2015). Some research on exchange students has challenged the *education first* assumption by investigating their motivations within a push-and-pull framework which suggests a more complex range of competing movivations.

In his investigation of the European scheme for student mobility, Teichler (2004) found that the decision to study abroad was driven by reasons or push factors such as learning a foreign language, self-development, academic experience in another country, better understanding of the host country, career prospects, and, (with particular relevance to the current study), the wish to travel (71% of the respondents), and for a break from usual surroundings (66% of respondents). Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008) list the desire for travel, entertainment, social experience in a different country and building new relationships as the most important push factors. These findings are partially confirmed by another study of the exchange program in Europe, which concluded that decisions to join are driven by personal and professional growth motives such as the opportunity to experience something new, grow personally, learn about different cultures, meet new people and have a semester away (Lesjak et al., 2015).

Rodriguez Gonzalez, Bustillo Mesanza, and Mariel (2011) characterised exchange student mobilities in Europe as a dual phenomenon. It shares some characteristics with migration flows, as decisions regarding the destination are affected by economic variables (such as living and transportation costs) and considerations of prospective career (such as the possibility to attend quality higher education institutions and to learn a relevant foreign language). On the other hand, the importance attributed to aspects of destination attractiveness may be interpreted as using the program to access leisure activities and to enjoy the lifelong unique experience of living abroad (Rodriguez Gonzalez et al., 2011). According to Teichler (2004) English-speaking countries, large countries and large cities are the first choices of destination amongst ESs**.**

Juvan and Lesjak (2011) confirmed that ESs seek experiences beyond the academic, arguing that they tend to select study locations that are highly competitive as tourism destinations; that they prioritize socialization motives such as experiences and the desire to

change environment (intended as escapism to relax); and that gaining experiences is also the top expected benefit. It is unsurprising that destination pull factors are more important than the University pull factors for ESs (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). In Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008) study the selection of a host country for exchange was primarily motivated by travel and tourism related factors such as possible tourist activities, attractions, landscape and scenery. Lesjak et al. (2015) found that sites and attractions, safety, culture, art, events and the fact that the destination has not yet been discovered by tourists are the most important exchange destination choice motivations in Europe. The differential attractiveness of a single University over others within the same region is attributable, amongst other factors, to the tourist attractiveness of the city it is located in (Rodríguez et al., 2012). These pull factors are consistent with those uncovered on international students by previous researchers. Perceptions of the host country's general environment, of its lifestyle, of its climate and of how studious (or not) it is are significant factors in choosing a study destination (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Exchange students want to "meet people, to travel and to enjoy life in a different environment" (Teichler, 2004, p. 406). The exchange has an "eye-opening and horizon-broadening effect", allows for a better understanding of the host country's culture and people through the first-person experience of its different academic systems, teaching and learning methods, communication styles, cultural environments and daily life (Teichler, 2004, p. 406). ESs pursue pure and authentic experiences and are willing to engage with the destination (Freestone & Geldens, 2008). The definition of ESs as tourists is supported by their travel-related considerations in their decision to participate in the program and select the destination. However, it is timely to re-examine the tendency to define them as education first educational tourists with a view to classifying them as tourism first educational tourists. This aspect suggests a distinction between international students and ESs. International students'

most important factors in deciding where to study are related to the quality, content and cost of education and influenced by the recommendations of friends and relatives (Michael et al., 2003). International students invest more resources and time in their overseas education, and the location of study will determine the prestige of their overall title of study, while ES choices are made while being already enrolled in a home university where they will carry on their studies. These arguments explain why ESs are of interest to both education institutions and tourism authorities, and how the destination tourism marketing can influence the choice of that study destination (Michael et al., 2003).

2.1.5   Defining the study population

Exchange students may now be defined in light of these various differences, namely as a sub-group of international students. They may be viewed as credit- rather than degree-seeking in the applicable destination, namely Hong Kong. ESs have a predetermined return home following the completion of their period abroad, typically of between a semester and a year. They will conclude their degree at their home university. In the present context ESs are viewed also as ascribable to the acculturating group of sojourners in their capacities as both international students and tourists**.**

The main reasons for selecting ESs as the population of interest in the present research is their potential as destination ambassadors. One of the most commonly discussed benefits of student exchange is the acquisition of multicultural skills and awareness of local cultures (Juvan & Lesjak, 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). These are attributable to the temporary period of exposure to an unfamiliar culture and country. ESs attach considerable importance to the possibility of meeting new people and establishing friendships while experiencing everyday life in an unfamiliar country (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). During the exchange period they are involved in a variety of evaluations such as balancing longer-term academic and work commitments with opportunities to gain maximum

advantage from a limited period of residence (Gardiner et al., 2013), and achieving a balance between retaining their own culture and absorbing aspects of what prevails locally (Freestone & Geldens, 2008; Morris, Savani, Mor, & Cho, 2014). The depth, length and mode of coping with such exposure to another culture will be understood in the context of the process of acculturation that ESs undergo during the semester.

Spending an extended period in the destination may also stimulate lifelong associations (King, 2015). Since those with a stronger connection to a place are more disposed to becoming destination ambassadors (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013), it is anticipated that changes occurring as a result of acculturation may affect the first-person storytelling of ES. This is even more so when considering that ES are younger, well-educated and more affluent travellers who display a higher propensity to share their travel experiences on social media (Rodriguez Gonzalez et al., 2011). The researcher has identified the differences and similarities between ESs, tourists and residents. The exchange student population is distinct because it combines higher education and travel abroad to develop both soft and academic skills. The structuring of student exchange experiences provides a rare combination of travel related activities and residential life within a common semester-long timeframe. The collective aims at both institutional and personal level facilitate observations about adjustments, especially as these are carried out by the origin and host universities as well as by the individual exchange student.

Finally, ESs provide an interesting medium to investigate destination ambassadorship because home universities expect them to reflect on their experiences. This requirement may facilitate the recollection of their thoughts about the stay, the place, their learning and their changes, and encourages re-telling in a structured manner. For these reasons, ESs allow the observation of acculturation and ambassadorship phenomena within a timeframe that is consistent with tourism parameters. The latter are defined not only statistically (duration of

stay of less than a year), but also by consumption patterns, behaviours in the destination and motivations to undertake the trip as discussed in the previous sub-sections.

2.1.6   Exchange student story-telling and word-of-mouth communications

Tourism researchers have recognized that destinations can benefit from their visitors' first-person accounts as an effective way to promote and brand themselves (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008; Tussyadiah, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011; Woodside et al., 2007). Whether in the form of face-to-face or online WOM communications, tourist stories and narratives allow potential visitors to access lived experiences of a destination and retrieve better information (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008; Tussyadiah et al., 2011). Such storytelling that reflects destination-related WOM merits investigation from the perspective of specific tourist segments (Sahin & Baloglu, 2014), in this case ESs.

In the international student context, much value is attributed to international alumni networks and alumni within family and friends as trusted sources of WOM referral for institutional reputation (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). International students rely on recommendations from friends and family both for their choice of country of study and as a source of information regarding travel destinations while studying in the host country (Michael et al., 2003). In estimating demand for the study destination by ESs, Bento (2014, p. 623) identified "factors behind destination choice related to traveller practices, preferences, prevailing expectations and shared beliefs". He also argues that these factors might have developed from, among others, WOM communications by previous ESs or also thanks to the efforts of the higher education institutions to become internationally renowned. Rodríguez et al. (2012) found that preferences depend on host University characteristics and the appeal of their environments; on institutional status; on the availability of agreements between the home and host Universities; and on the preferences that are "passed every year via word-of-mouth" between ES (Rodríguez et al., 2012, p. 1588).

Juvan and Lesjak (2011) regarded recommendations by friends as an important WOM promotional tool for study destinations. This was particularly true for the selection of historical and party cities. Rodriguez Gonzalez et al. (2011) applied a migration theory lens to European ESs and suggested that they are impelled to undertake mobility by the number of peers that have previously done so, and that awareness of the value of potential destinations derives from direct friends' or relatives' experience. In this sense Rodriguez Gonzalez et al. (2011) argued that mobility is not exactly a free and rational decision. These findings are consistent with Tussyadiah et al. (2011), who argued that identification with the story-teller and resemblance of the story with a past experience enhances the narrative capability to transmit knowledge and encourage visitation.

Several factors affect the transmission and type of destination-related story-telling and WOM. Guthrie and Anderson (2010) found that tourists' anticipations and predispositions affect the way they make sense of the tourist experience and reveals their intended messages. Tourists are more likely to recommend destinations if they are satisfied with their experience (Hui, Wan, & Ho, 2007). ESs' satisfaction with the experience is likely tied to the acculturation process, through which they find a way to function in the new context. It has been suggested that successful acculturation brings about life satisfaction for international students (Rasmi et al., 2009). Similarly, residents that perceive life in the destination as high quality, are more likely to display active citizenship behaviours (Azevedo, Custódio, & Perna, 2013). Chen et al. (2015) found that place satisfaction relates positively to both experiential and attitudinal attachments to the destination, and that attachment to the destination plays an important role in determining behavioural outcomes such as WOM and intention to recommend. This is consistent with previous studies on international students which found that approximately 80% of the international students to Galicia would recommend the centre where they stayed to other students (Pawlowska & Martínez, 2009); or

that international students that have stayed in a destination would recommend it to friends and relatives (Michael et al., 2003). Tourism researchers have validated that the likelihood of recommending a destination is significantly affected by the emotions evoked during service consumption (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013). Some authors have argued that providing higher education to foreign students constitutes a tool for spreading cultural, economic and political norms of the host study destination abroad (Beine et al., 2014).

Since word-of-mouth communication is key to promotion by universities (Rodríguez et al., 2012) and by tourist destinations (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013; Sahin & Baloglu, 2014), it seems reasonable to seek insights into the specific process that transforms ES into destination ambassadors while adjusting to the destination. Through the acquisition of destination related experiences, ESs possess real life experience and are potentially reliable storytellers about the destination. Although the researcher has been unable to find previous studies showing that exchange student satisfaction translates into advocacy, the above-mentioned literature suggests a relation between life satisfaction and likelihood to recommend a place (Azevedo et al., 2013). The current study argues that the process of acculturation constitutes the lens for interpreting relationships between ESs and the destination, and may explain the mode and likelihood of displaying brand ambassadorship behaviours.

For a summary of this first part of the literature review, readers are referred to Appendix "Literature review summary 1".

2.2 Acculturation

Following the above discussion of the literature on educational mobility, the remainder of the present chapter is dedicated to introducing the concept of acculturation. Given the relative permanence and depth of experience of ESs, the researcher will clarify why the acculturation framework suits the investigation of ES ambassadorships. Ultimately, the

researcher contends that acculturation is an appropriate framework to understand how ES ambassadorships are constructed and transmitted. First, the conditions in which acculturation occurs will be discussed; secondly, how such conditions have been tackled in the acculturation tradition are considered; thirdly, exchange students will be defined as an acculturating group; finally, the researcher introduces two streams of acculturation – consumer acculturation and re.

2.2.1   The evolving study of intercultural contact

Any experience involving transitory yet prolonged exposure to diversity and displacement from a familiar environment can trigger a process of adjustment and result in changes of cultural and personal outlooks (Brown, 2009). Exposure to diversity constitutes intercultural contact when encounters occur between culturally, ethnically or linguistically different individuals (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Many scholars have investigated "culture shock" as an aspect of intercultural contact (Pedersen, 1995).

The expression "culture shock" was introduced by Oberg (1960a) and has been defined as an "occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad" and exacerbated by the loss of all familiar cues of social interactions (p. 177). Early research on the topic came mostly from the fields of migration and mental health (Ward et al., 2001) and considered culture shock as an emotional "down" and a state of decreased wellbeing (Zapf, 1991). Hence the first approaches were clinically oriented and had a strong focus on medical aspects of cultural shock, in particular on the negative features of the transition experience.

During the 1950s the international education sector saw exchange programs gaining momentum and attention was drawn to the investigation of problems experienced by overseas students. This led to the emergence of a new strand of research on intercultural contact focusing on the sojourn experience (Ward et al., 2001). Though early theories applied to

international students remained clinically oriented, there was a progressive emphasis on the dynamic nature of intercultural contact.

A new view of intercultural contact as a learning experience emerged in the 1980s. It was seen as an on-going and dynamic process for both the sojourner and the host culture (Bochner, 1986; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The view that adaptation to a new environment requires the learning of culture-specific skills constitutes the "culture learning model" of intercultural contact (Bochner, 1986). It originates in social and experimental psychology and is one of three guiding contemporary approaches in the field.

The second guiding force is the stress and coping psychological model, which conceptualizes the sojourner transition as a series of intrinsically stressful life events that require certain adjustment resources and coping responses. The stress and coping approach is important in two ways: it emphasises that there is no one way of adjusting, but rather individuals can achieve adaptation in a variety of ways; and it points out that successful adaptation depends on a range of factors beyond person-related variables. The implication is that any intercultural contact is an inherently stressful event and the resulting adaptation is a status of newly found normal functioning in a new situation, occurring at both the psychological and sociocultural level (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Searle & Ward, 1990).

The stress and coping view of the sojourn is best exemplified in the work of Berry on acculturative stress (Berry et al., 1987). Stress is a physiological and psychological state that individuals experience by encountering stressors in the environment: when such stressors have their source in the acculturation process, the individual experiences acculturative stress (Berry et al., 1987). Acculturative stress is a "reduction in health status (including psychological, somatic and social aspects) of individuals who are undergoing acculturation, and for which there is evidence that these health phenomena are related systematically to

acculturation phenomena" (Berry et al., 1987). Individuals will be more or less able to achieve adaptation depending on the chosen strategies to deal with stressors (Ward et al., 2001).

A third guiding force in the study of intercultural contact is the influence of social identification theories. These explain the role of cultural and ethnical identity and of intergroup perceptions and relations on the adjustment process. The culture learning approach (Bochner, 1986) focuses on the behavioural changes brought about by intercultural contact; the stress and coping approach accounts for the affective and emotional effects. Finally, social identification theories have contributed to the literature on culture shock by focusing on the cognitive aspects of adjustment. Contemporary approaches to intercultural contact consider all three dimensions, (affective, behavioural and cognitive) constituting the ABCs of intercultural contact (Ward et al., 2001). These are the core concepts of the "psychology of culture shock" proposed by Ward et al. (2001), a contemporary approach that views intercultural contact as a series of encounters and events that are intrinsically stressful for the individual and that bring about affective, behavioural and cognitive changes.

As research on intercultural contact evolved, so did theories regarding the sequence of events that lead to adaptation. Oberg (1960b) argued that culture shock had a predictable progression and known phases such as honeymoon, aggression, humour and adjustment/acceptance. The honeymoon phase corresponded to the individual's initial positive excitement about the new environment. Later on, unfamiliar social cues would make it difficult to function in the host society, irritating the acculturating individual who would start manifesting negative behaviours towards the host society, entering the aggression phase. Over time the individual would start viewing the situation in a humorous manner, acquiring the necessary culture and language skills to get by and putting the experience into perspective. Finally, social cues and behaviours of the host society would be fully accepted,

and adjustment achieved. This process was first explicitly referred to as U-shaped by Lysgaard (1955) who introduced the U-curve adjustment model. The U-curve model was accepted for long and it was even argued that it applies to the re-entry phase as well (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Martin, 1984).

As the above-mentioned views on intercultural contact developed, several authors put the U-model "on-trial", criticizing its lack of empirical evidence (Pedersen, 1995; Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998), that it does not allow for personality differences among individuals and does not capture the complex nature of a person's life (Thomas and Harrell, 1994, as cited in Brown & Holloway, 2008). With the introduction of the aforementioned culture learning model it is increasingly accepted that the process of adaptation is actually dialectical and involves various "ups and downs" (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990).

2.2.2   Intercultural contact according to the acculturation framework

As intercultural contact research evolved, the focus expanded from medical aspects of culture shock, and from dimensions of physical changes (new place where to live, new type of housing, different population density, etc.) and biological changes (different nutrition, new diseases, interbreeding, etc.) to include cultural, social and psychological changes (Berry et al., 1987; Ward et al., 2001). Acculturation is one of the streams of literature on intercultural contact that emerged from this transition.

A review of the acculturation literature (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) recognized four dominant approaches proposed respectively by Berry (1997); Ward et al. (2001); Arends-Tóth and van de Vijver (2006) and Safdar, Lay, and Struthers (2003). Modern acculturation models commonly incorporate the taxonomy developed by Berry (1997), which considers attitudes of both the host and migrant groups as influencing the success of the overall acculturation process. The above mentioned ABCs of acculturation by Ward et al. (2001) expanded on this model to propose a more complex approach to acculturation, to include

affective, behavioural and cognitive factors. In addition, this model differentiates between psychological and sociocultural adaptation by taking into consideration the acquisition of behavioural skills. Models by Arends-Tóth and van de Vijver (2006) and Safdar et al. (2003) make use of individual characteristics, characteristics of the larger society and stressors as predictors of acculturation success. Arends-Tóth and van de Vijver (2006) include the characteristics of the origin culture as predictors too.

At its simplest level, acculturation is defined as "all the changes that arise following 'contact' between individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds" (Sam, 2006, p. 11). Acculturation has three main building blocks: contact, reciprocal influence and change. For acculturation to be defined as such, there has to be continuous and first-hand contact between at least two different cultures (Sam, 2006). Its definition as *continuous* leaves space for interpretation as of what should be the duration of the contact. Hence, *acculturation contact* varies along the degree of participation in the wider society, the duration and the frequency of contact between the cultures involved (Berry, 2006). The second main component of acculturation, *reciprocal influence,* holds that change can occur in all the groups coming into contact and not necessarily by achieving a mid-point (Sam, 2006). Finally, *change* is the inherent aspect of acculturation that involves both a dynamic process and a relatively static outcome (Sam, 2006). This aspect refers to psychological acculturation, which occurs at the individual level and is composed by affective, cognitive and behavioural individual changes (Sam, 2006; Schmitz, 2005). "Psychological acculturation" concerns the active coping with the situations experienced when confronted with a different cultural context (Schmitz, 2005) and the resulting changes in identity, values, attitudes and behaviours (Berry, 2005). As previously mentioned, coping is the individual's response to acculturative stress.

Acculturation strategies determine how acculturating groups and individuals cope with their intercultural encounters based on two dimensions: cultural maintenance and contact and participation (Berry, 1997). The first dimension refers to the extent to which acculturating groups and individuals consider important and strive for the maintenance of their cultural identity. The second dimension refers to the extent to which acculturating groups and individuals become involved in other cultural groups or remain dominantly among their own. Basically, these strategies allow groups and individuals to determine their degree of contact with origin and host cultures. The outcomes of this trade-off can be categorized in four main acculturation strategies: marginalization, separation, assimilation and integration.

In cases where individuals and groups show minimal interest in maintaining their own cultural integrity but also lack willingness to interact with the wider culture, the acculturation strategy is referred to as *marginalization*; if they avoid participation in and interaction with other cultures but value the maintenance of their own cultural identity, the chosen strategy is that of *separation*; *assimilation* refers to the strategy of those who do not place much value on maintaining their own culture but rather seek interaction with the larger society network; finally, *integration* is often referred to as the ideal acculturation strategy because it strikes the balance by showing interest in both maintaining the original culture and seeking participation as an integral part in the wider society (Berry, 2006).

2.2.3   Acculturating groups

In a culturally plural society, in which groups of different ethnicities and cultures reside within the same social and political framework (Skelton and Allen, 1999 in Berry, 2006), there are different acculturating groups that can be discerned based on several criteria. One differentiation is based on dimensions regarding the move to another country: voluntary/non-voluntary; sedentary/migrant; permanent/temporary (Berry, 2006; Schmitz, 2005). In addition, cultural distance from the host culture is another criteria to define the acculturating

groups (Berry et al., 1987). These aspects, together with individual and group attitudes, motives, values and abilities, will determine the likelihood of an acculturation process occurring, as well as its form and the degree of change resulting from it (Berry, 2006; Brown, 2009). Ward et al. (2001) identified the groups of interest for intercultural contact research as: tourists, sojourners (differentiated between international students and international business people), immigrants and refugees. This places ESs in the acculturating group of sojourners. There are also situational variables that change across acculturating groups. These refer to the variability of certain dimensions of intercultural contact across groups and situations, such as duration of stay, purpose of stay and type of involvement with the host culture (Bochner, 1982).

In terms of acculturating groups, international students are sojourners (Bochner, 2006), but research in fields other than acculturation contextualized international students in a variety of ways. In the previous literature review section, the researcher discussed how the international and exchange student experience can be interpreted as a form of migration. Among others, Beine et al. (2014) argue that international students are the fastest growing category of migrants and Rodriguez Gonzalez et al. (2011, p. 425) suggest that the exchange student mobility is a "migration-type" phenomenon. It has also been discussed how the student exchange experience closely resembles a tourism experience, to the point that it is named accordingly, such as "academic tourism" Rodríguez et al. (2012) or "global educational travel" (Grabowski et al., 2017). Exchange students can hardly be identified as a single acculturating group as previously described by the literature. Therefore the researcher remains cognizant of the specific situational variables (time-span, purpose and type of involvement) that define the acculturation experience of the ESs, as well as of the variables that define them as an acculturating group (voluntariness of relocation, im-/permanence of stay and cultural distance from the host culture).

As acculturation refers to change brought by the encounter and the negotiation of two cultures, it is argued here that the acculturation framework applies to the student exchange. Brown (2009) exemplified how sojourner adjustment frameworks suit the transformative power of international student experiences. In addition, by pointing out the similarities between international education and long-stay tourism, the author called for similar investigations on processes and outcomes of adjustment in tourism experiences. Rasmi et al. (2014) segmented tourists on the basis of the chosen acculturation strategy. Rasmi et al. (2009) utilized acculturation models to longitudinally examine relationship between predictors and outcomes of international students' acculturation. It is therefore clear that previous research has recognized the applicability of the acculturation framework to both tourists and to international students.

Acculturation might assist understanding the formation of brand ambassadorships in the exchange student population in that it has an ultimate influence on the destination experience. Attitudes towards a destination are not only affected by tourism related services, but also by interactions with the general public; how local residents perceive the students' origin country; how locals perceive the students' compatriots; and student interactions with the local authorities (Nyaupane, Teye, & Paris, 2008). This aligns with stronger integration into the local community, thereby leading to a more satisfying sojourn (Bochner, 2006). Research on international students has proved that successful acculturation translates into better life satisfaction and enhances outward interaction during their stay (Rasmi et al., 2009).

There is an evident opportunity to draw upon the findings of previous studies about acculturation, the international student experience and brand ambassadorship to develop a conceptual framework that provides context for how ES behave during the student exchange and for how they communicate about the destination.

In the following subsections the researcher will draw from the acculturation literature to contextualize ESs as an acculturating group. In particular, following Bochner (2006), it will be explained how sojourners are a subset of migrants, and international students and tourists are types of sojourner. Finally, it will be argued that ES qualify both as international students and as tourists. Implications of this ambiguity in terms of time-span, purpose and type of involvement for ES will be discussed.

2.2.4   Sojourner acculturation

A sojourn is a temporary stay in a foreign country and, while there is no fixed criterion for the duration of a sojourn, it is usually intended as a stay of at least six months to a maximum of five years (Ward et al., 2001). The major sojourner groups are international students, tourists and expatriates (Berry, 2006; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Only international students and tourists are of interest for this study, because exchange students are ascribable to both of these groups.

Berry (2006) defined sojourners as individuals that take up residence in the host country temporarily, for a set purpose in a variety of roles. Bochner (2006) added that they are voluntary migrants "who travel abroad to attain a particular goal, within a specific period of time" (p. 181). ESs are viewed as sojourners who travel willingly to an overseas study destination to carry out part of their higher education. The student exchange decision process starts with an internally driven decision to study internationally rather than locally for a certain time (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This decision can be determined by both push and pull factors (Berry et al., 1987). Presumably, ES represent a migrant group with a high level of control over the decision to move, as they normally have to apply to and be selected by their alma mater to undertake an exchange. Engaging in the process is a sign of intrinsic motivation, which, as it will be discussed in the

section on employee brand ambassadorship, is important to determine the strength of pro-brand attitudes and behaviours.

In considering the applicable timeframe, Bochner (2006) argues that the **finite perspective** of sojourners makes them worthy of separate examination in the acculturation literature, because it may impact on the method of acculturation. Such impermanence of the sojourn may be the source of greater acculturative stress, as it complicates the process of involvement in the host society, by hindering the establishment of relationships with its members or the identification with the host society (Berry, 2006; Berry et al., 1987). Predetermination of the return home is a strong feature of international education, but is accentuated in the student exchange and in tourism (Carr & Axelsen, 2009; Freestone & Geldens, 2008; IAU, 2015; UNWTO, 2008).

In terms of situational variables, the temporariness of sojourn translates to a specific time-span. In the case of ES this goes from a few months to a maximum of one year. In most cases, ES reside in the study destination for the duration of a semester. The current study argues that the timeframe and the return prospective are very likely to influence the extent and the modes of acculturation by ES, but agrees with Rasmi et al. (2009) in arguing that they are faced with most of the issues that challenge other acculturating groups.

2.2.5   Tourist acculturation

Tourism is the most common form of face-to-face intercultural encounter. Not only tourists have to balance preferences for familiarity or novelty, but they also have to negotiate between the home and the host culture (Rasmi et al., 2014). Even though they are the largest acculturating group within sojourners, Bochner (2006) said little about tourist acculturation, because he believed that their contact with the host society is superficial and their belief system remains unchanged. This is partly because their time-is span usually shorter than that of other acculturating groups and because their main purposes being relaxation and

enjoyment (Bochner, 2006). Another limitation could be more spatially constrained culture contact options than other acculturating groups (Rasmi et al., 2014). Based on this assumption, the degree of change brought by the tourism experience should depend on its purpose and duration, and therefore long-stay tourists should be more likely to undergo a process of acculturation than short-term tourists (Brown, 2009). Yet, according to Sam (2006), the duration of intercultural contact is less important than the associated change, so even the tourist short-term encounters with the place that is visited can trigger some changes in the individual and start a process of acculturation.

The present study discusses issues of tourist acculturation because of its potential impacts on attitudes and satisfaction towards a destination, which, when positive, are likely to translate into recommendations (Hui et al., 2007). Though changes in visitor attitudes towards the destination and its residents are mainly affected by interactions with the general public (Nyaupane et al., 2008), bringing tourists and hosts into intercultural contact does not necessarily translate into a positive change of tourist attitudes towards the host destination (Paris, Nyaupane, & Teye, 2014). The type of interaction is the main driver of change in tourists attitudes (Nyaupane et al., 2008). Therefore there is a need to investigate tourists' acculturation strategies. By identifying tourist groups based on their chosen acculturation strategies, researchers have explained their preferences in terms of tourist behaviours, undertaken activities and chosen destinations (Rasmi et al., 2014). Hence, acculturation is here considered as a potential factor affecting a destination experience and the willingness to become its ambassador.

2.2.6   International student acculturation

The international education phenomenon has contributed to the formation of culturally plural societies by relocating students for study purposes. International education exchange is based on the hypothesis that cultural contact reduces conflicts by overcoming ignorance

about the other cultures (Bochner, 2006). International students are characterized by a relatively high educational level, which usually relates to better acculturation outcomes, supposedly because of enhanced cognitive abilities to deal with new environments (Berry et al., 1987). Given the purpose of pursuing higher education in the destination, international students often seek to achieve mutual cross-cultural understanding (Bochner, 2006), multicultural skills and host culture awareness (Juvan & Lesjak, 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). These motivations have the potential to have a strong influence on the acculturation process, particularly in terms of degree and quality of engagement with the host culture.

Acculturation studies of international students have evidenced that well integrated international students perform better, are less anxious, feel more self-esteem, and are more satisfied with the overall sojourn (Bochner, 2006). Among the antecedents of successful acculturation, previous literature has identified individuals' personal characteristics, such as students' ability to recognize opportunities rather than threats and their capability to cope with them (Schmitz, 2005; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Psychological factors have, in fact, been found to be important towards successful acculturation (Berry, 2006; Berry et al., 1987) particularly in relation to the extent to which international students experience acculturative stress and adjustment problems (Schmitz, 2005; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). When these stressors are perceived as threatening they can initiate close-mindedness as a defensive response (Schmitz, 2005). Whether an individual appraises a life change as a threat or as an opportunity depends on his/her cognitive abilities, while responses to such events define his/her coping strategies. Cognitive appraisal and coping determine the success of students' psychological adaptation (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006).

Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) found that the psychological and sociocultural acculturation processes were significantly influenced by student perceptions about having a

more or less secure attachment to certain figures in their lives. International students with high levels of attachment anxiety (need for validation and fear of rejection) were less likely to adapt to the host culture; those that had higher levels of attachment avoidance (excessive need for self-reliance and fear of intimacy) were more likely to incur sociocultural problems and psychological distress; finally, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance and low identification with the host culture were significant predictors of psychological acculturation difficulties. Other factors influencing psychological acculturation include the individual's previous acculturation experience and the applicable acculturation phase (Schmitz, 2005).

While Universities seem to have interventions in place to encourage international student social interactions, there are few instruments to support psychological acculturation. Smith and Khawaja (2014) developed and piloted a psychological group intervention aimed at improving international students' coping skills for better psychological adaptation. Results were measured longitudinally pre, post and one month after the intervention. It was shown that international students reached and maintained higher levels of psychological adjustment and knowledge about related concepts after the program. Therefore institutional efforts can gain results beyond the socialization sphere and can impact international students' acculturation strategies. Individuals and groups who are more agreeable, socially active and more socially adjusted, for example, choose the assimilation strategy. Those who choose the segregation strategy are uninterested in establishing relationships with the locals and knowing more about the local culture (Schmitz, 2005).

Brown and Holloway (2008) suggest that international students derive some positive feelings from the exploration of their new environment on arrival, but predominantly experience acculturative stress from establishing linguistic, academic and everyday life competencies while battling homesickness and loneliness. One often neglected aspect in the literature has been adjustments to the college environment. The Student Adaptation to

College Questionnaire (SACQ) is the most common instrument measuring students' ability to successfully adjust to the new college environment. It is based on four broad categories: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment and institutional attachment (Baker & Siryk, 1984). Adjustment to college life is strongly predicted by personal traits and self-evaluations, as well as by social support. With regard to the latter, peers' social support better helps with students social adjustment, while institutional support is more strongly related to students' academic adjustment (Credé & Niehorster, 2012).

Other main sources of identified acculturative stress are: acquisition of a new language; adjustment to a new education system; perceived discrimination; practical or lifestyle matters (housing, realizing one's own religious practices, dealing with public authorities, etc.) and the establishment and the nature of new relationships and friendships (Schmitz, 2005; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The latter aspect in particular was object of extensive investigation with regard to international students. A network of social support reduces perceived acculturative stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) and the kind of social networks impact on the emotional investment in the host society (Bochner, 2006).

Sociocultural difficulties are less significant for students with better language proficiency and who stay longer in the destination. This is in line with the view that gaining and performing culturally specific skills and behaviours requires time and language abilities (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). A longitudinal study by Rasmi et al. (2009) on international students has corroborated the benefits of social support by evidencing that psychosocial resources such as psychological well-being, out-group social support and cultural competence have a positive correlation with out-group and in group contacts and a negative correlation with psychophysical distress later in time. While there is little discussion around ESs' social networks and acculturation, three kinds of in-destination social networks were identified amongst international students − conationals, non-conationals, other foreigners and host

nationals (Bochner, 2006). The relationship with the host nationals proved to be the most helpful towards acculturation and in some cases to encourage undertaking leisure activities (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Bertram et al. (2014) found that Chinese international students in the USA relied on the support network in the home country when faced with stressors during their overseas sojourn. While their social support network had grown in size, its depth had not, leading to challenges in gaining social support in the host culture and hence causing acculturative stress. Ramsay, Jones, and Barker (2007) found that enhanced international student adjustments are associated with higher levels of social companionship support compared to their less adjusted counterpart, highlighting the key role of friendships. The same research also pointed out that a relevant portion of international students did not have anyone providing them with social companionship support (around 20% of the respondents), and needed higher levels of informational, emotional and practical support. In light if these findings Ramsay et al. (2007) recommended that institutions concentrate on the development of peer relationships. Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2011) found that international students with proportionately more host national friends report higher levels of satisfaction and contentment and lower levels of homesickness. The more diverse and varied such network of host national friends is, the more satisfied and socially connected the international students feel. Finally, successful acculturation reduces international students inter/intrapersonal constraints to participation in leisure activities, and participation in leisure activities and social events are significant predictors of social adjustment to college (Gómez, Urzúa, & Glass, 2014).

Social networks are also important when selecting a study destination. As previously explained, Beine et al. (2014), Rodriguez Gonzalez et al. (2011) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) suggested that international and ES are likely to select destinations where they can expect to find an established social support network of people from their same country. The

comfort of perceived social support reduces expected adaptation costs and increases their optimism about acceptance. Nyaupane et al. (2011) found that the presence of close friends in the host country was, together with academic motivation, a priority when selecting a study destination. Social aspects expected to fulfil needs for self-esteem, social acceptance and sense of belonging were the most important predictors of pre-trip attitude toward a destination.

Notwithstanding the extensive literature on international students adjustment to study destinations, there is also research suggesting that expected outcomes of learning and understanding the destination culture are rarely achieved (Michelson & Álvarez Valencia, 2016). For example, it is suggested that experiences discourses of tourism prevail over those of education during study abroad (Michelson & Álvarez Valencia, 2016). An ethnographic research by Brown and Holloway (2008) found that some international students adapt a segregation approach to adjustment, which limits the acquisition of the host language and the cultural learning process. Despite this, being distant from the familiar seems to bring international students to a new understanding of their selves. As will be shown brand ambassadorship may be incompatible with the separation or marginalization strategies of acculturation, because it requires a sense of belonging to a brand community, based on interpersonal relationships.

To summarize, "[a]cculturation involves contact that takes place at both group and individual levels leading to changes which for the individual entail affective, behavioural and cognitive changes […] and subsequent long-term modification of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation." (Sam, 2006, p. 21). In light of these considerations, it is maintained here that interactions amongst ESs, with co-nationals and with local nationals influence their adjustment and overall destination experience. ESs are likely to face similar challenges and

are affected by the same sort of factors as international students. There is however acknowledgement that the main difference is the much shorter time frame at the destination.

2.2.7   Re-acculturation

Besides the acculturation to the study's destination culture, acculturation and intercultural contact literature also addresses issues of returning migrants and sojourners. Christofi and Thompson (2007) found that returning international students have dramatic experiences of repatriation. On the ground of cultural comparison, the experience of re-establishing life at home after studying abroad resulted in bipolar experiences of conflict/peace, reality/idealization, freedom/restriction, changing/static and comfort/discomfort.

Dettweiler et al. (2015) demonstrated that students experience reverse culture shock returning from study abroad experiences as short as six months. The authors corroborate the findings by Allison, Davis-Berman, and Berman (2012) who postulated that students returning from expeditionary learning programmes experience a U-curved reverse culture shock in their home countries. The reverse culture shock experience manifests itself as a "re-adjustment to the alien old world" (Dettweiler et al., 2015, p. 86). Narratives of this process are ascribable to five main categories: reintegration narratives of reverse culture shock symptoms; perceptions of schooling during the expedition vs at home; reported changes in self-perceptions; discussion of the perceived effects of the programme; and discussion of the integrated social context acquired while abroad versus the social context in the re-entry (Dettweiler et al., 2015).

Awareness of the fact that the return home also involves a reverse process of acculturation is relevant for understanding the conditions surrounding participant ambassadorships once home.

To see a summary of the second part of the literature review, please refer to Appendix "Literature review summary 2".

2.3 Brand ambassadorship

The researcher now presents a detailed literature review with a view to explain the destination brand ambassadorship concept. She will draw upon relevant marketing literature to create a definition suited to this research's purpose. To do so the researcher dwells upon two main concepts: exchange students as destination internal stakeholders and the definition of destination brand. This helps the reader to understand the perspective applied to this research. From a tourism perspective, ambassadorship is often seen as synonymous with destination brand ambassadorship. Therefore, it is necessary to have more understanding of destination brands in order to grasp the meaning of ambassadorship. Destination branding is an elusive topic for several reasons. First of all, tourist destinations have "multiple personalities, many stakeholders, more contact points, more geographical dispersion, more intangibility, and more visuals" (Tasci & Kozak, 2006, p. 311). In addition, destinations are accountable to a heterogeneous range of stakeholders and target a multiplicity of geographic markets, meaning that they need to address differing market interests and deploy a diverse range of products (Pike, 2005). Secondly, the destination branding theory and practice combines products, services and corporate branding under a unique strategy (Balakrishnan et al., 2011). This results in a far more complex branding than that of consumer products (Tasci & Kozak, 2006).

Another challenge is distinguishing between destination stakeholder groups such as consumers and suppliers, and internal and external stakeholders. For example, tourists and business investors are destination consumers, while residents play the roles of both consumers and suppliers (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). ESs, in their multiple roles as tourists, residents and sojourners (temporary residents) could be considered as both internal and

external stakeholders. Their role as sojourners has already been explained with reference to the acculturation process. In addition, the lifestyle and consumption patterns of ESs during the period of study closely resemble those of the local residents (Rodríguez et al., 2012). Charlotte et al. (2015), provide the example of Chinese students in Australia. They argue that they represent a group of residents and therefore destination's internal stakeholders with a role in place branding. Hence, the principles of organizational citizenship and organizational internal brand building are applicable.

At the same time, ESs are a population that should interest tourism destination authorities and the industry. In fact the student exchange has been previously discussed as a tourism model (Bento, 2014; Rodríguez et al., 2012). This discussion has extended to how ESs contribute to destination economies by spending money from the outside on services offered not only by the University but also by the destination, such as accommodation, food, travel and leisure (Cubillo et al., 2006; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Roppolo, 1996; UNESCO, 2013) . The current study is in line with these approaches, whereby the international student is both a resident and an experienced tourist capable of brand ambassadorship behaviours similar to those of both corporate's internal stakeholders and customers.

A second issue of concern concerns the term "brand" in the expression "destination brand ambassadors". Aaker (1991) defines *brand* as "a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors" (Aaker, 1991, p. 7). In this sense, brand constitutes an intentionally constructed communication device for destination's commercial purposes (Hankinson, 2004).

For present research purposes the place name is regarded as a brand in itself. Like brand names, place names have been around for a long time, therefore even when the place's

brand is not consciously managed, simply voicing the place's name can recall certain associations into people's minds (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, 2011). A place name evokes the place's image, defined as "the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places. Images represent a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with a place. They are a product of the mind trying to process and pick out essential information from huge amounts of data about a place" (Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993). The image results from individuals' interpretation of the destination messages accumulated through a variety of stakeholders and via a multiplicity of communication media (Balakrishnan, Nekhili, & Lewis, 2011; Tasci & Kozak, 2006). Country brand ranking systems such as FutureBrand © (2015) are an example of the concept of brand as image. These systems award a country the label of "country brand" only if the audience perceives it as performing particularly well across some main dimensions, namely Quality Of Life, Value System, Business Potential, Culture, History, Tourism and "Made In". The "Made in" is particularly interesting, as it refers to the effect that the country of origin has on consumer attitudes towards the country's products and services (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, 2011; Kotler et al., 1993). Thus, a place name is a brand name, and in this capacity elicits audience perceptions about reputation (Kotler & Gertner, 2002).

Such brand definitions are relevant to the current study, with a focus on unsolicited destination-related communications through ES accounts. It can be referred to as destination's WOM. WOM may be defined as "oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator, whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service" (Nyilasy, 2006, p. 164). Destination story-telling involves visitor communications of episodes and incidents that bear the "unique associations and emotional highpoints" recalled when discussing the destination (Woodside et al., 2007, p. 173). Hence, visitor first-person narratives about their destination experience resemble is like

consumers' reports on product brand use. Visitors' word of mouth is, like product or service WOM, a "naturally occurring fact of consumers' lives, who talk about products, brands, marketers, or their advertising among themselves, and by default they do not consciously serve a marketing strategy while doing that" (Nyilasy, 2006).

Visitor WOM communications encapsulate their take-away images of the destination (Woodside et al., 2007, p. 173). Hence, destination brand ambassadorships by ESs convey their first-person destination experiences and their own elaboration of such experiences. That is to say, what the ES communicates to the audience is a report of their own destination *brand relationship*. This concept views the brand as having a personality with which the consumer can establish a relationship (Hankinson, 2004). A consumer-brand relationship's quality depends, among other factors, on aspects such as: self-connection, understood as the degree to which the brand can express relevant aspects of the consumer's self-concept (Fournier, 1998) or the congruity between consumer's self-image and brand (Hankinson, 2004); interdependence, defined as frequency of interactions with the brand, consumption rituals and the brand being interwoven into the consumer's daily life (Fournier, 1998); and finally, the congruity between consumer's needs and the brand functional and symbolic attributes (Hankinson, 2004).

It is argued here that ESs engage in a series of encounters with tourism providers in the destination and thereby establish a relationship. When destination ambassadorships occur, the brand relationship is the message that is transmitted to the audience. Such relationships are built through destination consumption occurring daily throughout the destination experience. In fact, the destination fulfils the needs of exchange students (whether tourism or education related, or both) and the interactions with the destination develop over time. Exchange student accounts of their destination brand relationships are understood here as forming part

of the destination messages that contribute to the formation of beliefs and impressions about a destination, to its reputation, and ultimately to its organic image.

To summarize, in this study the destination brand is

- transmitted in the form of a place name, namely Hong Kong, which therefore constitutes a brand name;

- formed between ES and the destination throughout the development of the brand relationship;

- welcomed in the mind of the audience as a brand image and/or a set of associations about the destination's reputation.

In addition:

- accounts of the ESs' destination brand relationships contribute to accumulated perceptions about the destination and its reputation;

- the accumulation of such perceptions results in the destination organic image;

- the destination brand name (i.e. the place name itself, namely Hong Kong) is capable of recalling the audience's organic image about the destination.

To conclude, the destination brand is defined for the purposes of this study as

"the destination's place name, i.e. Hong Kong, used in exchange student accounts of the destination brand relationship, and capable of eliciting the destination organic image from the audience".

To see a summary of the literature review on brand ambassadorship, readers are referred to the appendix **"Literature review summary 3a".**

2.3.1   Customer-based brand ambassadorships

ESs are destination consumers in that they engage in a series of encounters with tourism products and services. In fact, ES often benefit from services and products that are also utilised by tourists in fulfilling their needs. With this perspective in mind, understanding customer-based brand ambassadorship can shed light on some aspects of ESs' destination ambassadorships. In the following sections the researcher contextualizes ES destination ambassadorships from the perspective of customer-based brand ambassadorships.

2.3.1.1   Brand equity: customer WOM contributions to brand awareness, image and loyalty

Understanding destination ambassadorship from a customer-based brand ambassadorship perspective starts with brand equity. This may be defined as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers" (Aaker, 1991, p. 16). It is the collection of intangible assets in a single perception that produces superiority over the competition, namely the equity represented by the brand name (Aaker, 1991). Keller (1993) defines customer-based brand equity as the differential effect of the brand on consumer response to brand communication. Wood (2000) argues that brand equity should be understood as the extent of consumers' attachment to the brand and the connotations and views they have about it.

Brand equity is reinforced by brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand associations and perceived quality. Awareness, associations and perceived quality are characteristics that people can attribute to brands that they never used, while loyalty is more dependent on the purchase or use experience (Aaker, 1991). Tourism researchers have suggested that destination managers should make use of brand equity as a measurement of the success of a place (Zavattaro, Daspit, & Adams, 2015). In the destination context, brand equity results

from awareness (cognitive), quality and image (affective), and loyalty (conative) (Keller, 1993; Yang, Liu, & Li, 2015). The researcher will briefly discuss these components of brand equity below.

Brand awareness (the ability to recognize or recall a brand as part of a product class) results from communication about the brand. A satisfied and established customer base can provide brand exposure by merely using the brand in ways that are visible to friends and colleagues, thereby providing assurance to prospective customers (Aaker, 1991). Customers constitute brand anchors, namely familiar persons and contexts for the brand's usage. By representing a link to the brand, anchors facilitate the creation of brand associations (readily accessible memories of the brand) (Aaker, 1991). If associations elicit positive feelings, these will be transferred to the brand and the prospective consumer will establish positive brand attitudes and will have a positive perception of the brand's quality (Aaker, 1991). The greater the extent of risk associated with the purchase, the greater the likelihood that the prospective consumer will trust WOM. The efficacy of WOM increases when receivers perceive that the communicator as unbiased and that the WOM is vivid and interactive (Nyilasy, 2006).

It is hard for tourists to determine objective destination quality prior to visiting. WOM communications are particularly appropriate as an information source for something intangible and experience-based, and constitute a credible testimonial of the distinctive character of a place (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013) and of intangible destination attributes (Sahin & Baloglu, 2014). WOM, in its role as a channel for communications about the brand to the external environment, contributes to overall destination brand equity by playing an important role in building destination brand awareness, associations and image. The researcher views ESs as part of the destination's customer base that can also expose the destination brand to their social network. By doing so, ES act as anchors to their friends, relatives and colleagues, who associate the destination to the ES.

Destination marketers should participate in WOM conversations about the brand that occur amongst consumers. This can benefit the formation of the destination brand image which is arguably the factor with the greatest effect on overall destination brand equity (Yang et al., 2015). In particular, WOM is powerful in the formation of a destination's organic image, namely perceptions about whether the destination is rewarding or disappointing. Individuals form organic images by accumulating and assimilating information from different sources (Gunn, 1997). Among these, WOM plays an important role, because it is considered "extraordinarily believable" (Keller, 2007, p. 451). Individuals have greater trust in personal recommendations from friends or acquaintances than in advertising or corporates (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013; Nyilasy, 2006; Wragg, 2004). The latter are responsible for a destination's induced image through the so-called "official" marketing and advertising campaigns, promotions and publicities which credibility is waning (Gunn, 1997; Keller, 2007). WOM complements advertising and constitutes an indirect contact between the destination and potential consumers (Yang et al., 2015).

Exchange student ambassadorships are therefore capable of translating the place's name into a certain destination's image in the receiver's mind. The current study investigates how exchange students' WOM contributes to the construction of Hong Kong's organic image. The relevance of observing this phenomenon lies in the fact that holding a certain organic image of a place creates a strong brand association (Balakrishnan et al., 2011). Therefore, by understanding the image of Hong Kong that is advanced by exchange students, the researcher can shed light on the strength and the type of brand associations that they encourage. WOM also constitutes a convenient way to market a destination, as it is given at no cost and is unsolicited (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013, p. 854). Therefore authorities in destination Hong Kong can benefit from understanding how WOM communications about the city are constructed and transmitted.

The final element of brand equity, brand loyalty, refers to the strength of consumer attachment to the brand (Wood, 2000), the stability of the consumer-brand relationship, and the process of constructing and maintaining this bond over time (Fournier, 1998). Another way to refer to brand loyalty is through *commitment*, which key indicators are: "the amount of interaction and communication that is involved *with* the product"; the amount of communication *about* it; the likelihood to recommend it; its relevance to the consumers' person, their activities or personality; and its enjoyability (Aaker, 1991). In the case of destinations, brand loyalty is often measured in repeat visits (similar to the purchase intentions) and positive WOM (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013; Hui et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2015).

One basis for WOM communications is brand advocacy, where consumers actively share their experiences with the brand and the associated lifestyle. Advocacy is marketing's "new buzz word" (Wragg, 2004, p. 36) and WOM is the most effective marketing communication channel (Keller, 2007; Wragg, 2004). The same individual is at moments sender and at moments receiver of WOM communications (Keller, 2007). WOM constitutes a meaningful tool for place coordinators to address certain target groups (Andersson & Ekman, 2009). Part of the strength of WOM resides in its normative influence, hence the fact that it allows the receiver for conformity with certain influencers and group norms. In this sense, ESs can be understood as opinion leaders regarding the destination in their own social networks. The destination is a significant part of their lives and because they are involved with it, they potentially talk about it much, hence having a knowledge-based antecedent to WOM.

In this study it is believed that ESs can be transformed into a "living advertising space" (Wragg, 2004, p. 37). They play a central role as testimonials for the destination and as source of advocacy, as the receivers are likely to have the perception that they are expert

sources. While the marketing literature has pointed out that WOM tends to occur between close friends and relatives rather than acquaintances, there is also evidence that the type of social relationship can determine whether WOM will occur or not (Nyilasy, 2006). Their advocacy is here referred to as Destination Ambassadorship and is defined as follows:

"the active advancing into the external environment of communication about the destination experience and the associated lifestyle. It is an unsolicited and proactive behaviour that takes the form of verbal or visual narrative, both in person or online".

Destination ambassadorships not only initiate destination brand equity by stimulating awareness, but are also a consequence of brand equity, because they emerge from the commitment of loyal customers. By promoting awareness, ambassadorship is also an input in the destination image formation process and therefore in the formation of perceptions of destination quality.

2.3.1.2   Self-expression

Self-expression is one reason why consumers may engage in destination brand advocacy.

"Self-brand connection" is a determinant of the consumer-brand relationship. It can be defined as the degree to which the brand expresses significant aspects of the self (Fournier, 1998); or as "the extent to which individuals have incorporated a brand into their self-concept" (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, p. 339). There will be stronger brand relationships with brands significant to the consumer's ego. Through brand relationships, individuals seek a way to play out projects, concerns and themes that they identify by. Therefore the relationship is a way to cultivate the self and is stronger if there is compatibility between goals (Fournier, 1998). That is why those brands that facilitate identity construction elicit more powerful emotional responses, including advocacy, and are the most loved ones

(Ahuvia, 2005; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Similarly to a brand, a place can also be important to the self-concept: there may be place attachment or the place may have identity salience to the individual. Both encourage positive WOM (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008).

Escalas and Bettman (2003) argue that consumers are more likely to develop self-brand connections with a brand if it has a strong usage association with a reference group and consumers perceive this group to be strongly linked with their current or aspirational self. Because of self-verification needs, consumers may seek consistency with their self-concept and form self-brand connections with brands used by their membership group; or they may fulfil self-enhancement needs by forming self-brand connections with brands associated to aspirational groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). These principles also seem to be supported in other areas. Nyaupane et al. (2011) find that the choice of study abroad destinations is mostly influenced by academic and social ties motivations, suggesting that the choice reflects norms and values of students' reference groups (in this case the educational and social groups). This means that "associations about reference groups become associated with brands those groups are perceived to use and vice versa" (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, p. 339). Brand managers would benefit from nurturing their brand advocates by making them feel emotionally engaged and part of a tribe (Wragg, 2004). When individuals perceive themselves as belonging to a certain human aggregate they assimilate the corresponding social identity and develop a collective self. As by social identification theories, identification is a feeling of oneness towards the human aggregate with which individuals establish psychological relationships. It may be *any* human aggregate, regardless of whether the individual is its formal or symbolic member (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011).

Given that exchange students form relationships that assist them in constructing their identity during the study abroad (Grabowski et al., 2017), it would be interesting to understand the human aggregates they seek to belong to for the purposes of the current study.

These considerations become even more important to destination brand ambassadorship by ESs when it is considered that consumers are now potentially powerful marketing tools providing positive WOM throughout social networks thanks to the widespread use of social media. Through sharing and liking on social media, users make brands part of their online identity. Hence, social network profiles are a reflection of user's owned and aspirational brands, in particular lifestyle brands (Wallace, Buil, & De Chernatony, 2012). Destinations are a good example of aspirational brands that can turn into owned brands only with the experience itself. The choice of a destination might be aimed at experiencing a certain lifestyle which represents an extension of the exchange student's self-concept in the destination (Lesjak et al., 2015). The relevance of the destination to the exchange students' self-expression might drive not only the choice of the destination, but also communication about it. It is expected that through destination's advocacy, similarly to what occurs for service based industry, "a clear and distinct lifestyle persona emerges" (Wragg, 2004, p. 37).

Finally, brand advocacy is affected by the relationship with the conversational partners that make up the space for self-expression. Today's sophisticated consumers evaluate experiences based not only on explicit visual cues of a servicescape, but also by the quality of the social interactions during consumption, which are significant antecedents of positive WOM. Tourism in particular is a social activity whereby social factors are the most important in explaining the likelihood of positive WOM about destinations (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013). In some cases even crowding significantly and positively affects the likelihood of positive WOM recommendations, probably because human interactions may reduce anxiety and acculturative stress (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). It is known that ES value meeting new people and start new social relationships during the exchange period (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008): it will be one of the outcomes of this study to discuss how such social relationships affect destination ambassadorship.

In the current study the researcher will investigate how ESs integrate the destination brand into their identities, including their online identities, and how this affects the way they provide exposure to and convey communication about the destination.

2.3.1.3   Sense of place

The present study views sense of place as a potential influence on the ways in which exchange students convey messages about the destination and what kind of communications they advance.

Sense of place has been defined as the meanings and values attached to it by those whose place it is, and is based on the awareness of the place's atmosphere, habits and communal practices (Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, & Gnoth, 2014). It is argued that sense of place assists in identifying *which* elements have cultural significance to the place, *how* and *why*. Appreciating the cultural characteristics of the place assists in effectively constructing the destination brand. Campelo et al. (2014) conceptualize sense of place as *genius loci*, specifically "the shared sense of the spirit of the place", a concept that includes place attachment. Embodiment and time passing are seen as the two elements that facilitate the acquisition of the *genius loci* (Campelo et al., 2014, p. 155). Because student exchange programs aim at the acquisition of awareness of local cultures (Juvan & Lesjak, 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008), and because exchange student stays are relatively long, the researcher argues here that exchange students are predisposed to the acquisition of a sense of place.

Simpson and Siguaw (2008) argue that place attachment or bonding are concepts similar to that of place identity salience in that all three constructs place the destination as a part of the self-concept. In their study they found that longer-stay tourists were more likely to be satisfied about the place, promote it via WOM and feel place attachment to the destination than other tourist segments and even residents. In particular, the same study found both

satisfaction and place attachment were predictors of WOM promotion for all segments but transient tourists, who were in fact the least likely to promote the area. Azevedo et al. (2013) found that length of residence was significantly correlated with place attachment and those who lived in the place for a longer time were happier. Experiential aspects of place attachment such as place memories and place expectations play an important role in cultivating international students' WOM behaviour and their intentions to recommend the destination (Chen et al., 2015). Finally, place attachment itself influences residents self-efficacy (the perception that the place is conducive to achieving daily life purposes), which is in turn positively related to active citizenship and happiness (Azevedo et al., 2013).

Though unlike permanent residents, exchange students are not formal members of the destination, they can still identify with the destination. Therefore, given the purpose and the length of the exchange students' stay, they have a good chance of developing a sense of place as well as place attachment, both of which are likely to affect destination brand ambassadorships.

2.3.1.4 Satisfaction

Emotions elicited during the destination experience are the most significant factors in explaining customer satisfaction. This is why respondents speak less about satisfying experiences than about experiences that elicited emotions way beyond or below the expectation, such as delight or disappointment (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013). Satisfaction with the overall destination experience is important for the authorities because it increases the likelihood of recommendations to family and friends, as well as the likelihood of revisitation (Hui et al., 2007). Simpson and Siguaw (2008) confirm this relation in their study whereby satisfaction of residents and visitors was identified as an important predictor of likelihood of WOM recommendations. In the case of residents, Azevedo et al. (2013) identify a positive influence of quality of life, social identification and life satisfaction on place attachment,

which in turn influences perceived happiness and active citizenship behaviours. In the context of European exchange programs, Mitchell (2015) found that satisfaction with the student exchange and a longer sojourn enhance the identification with Europe. When there is identification, destination brand ambassadorship contributes to the consumer's self-expression, while it benefits the brand with implicit endorsement (Andersson & Ekman, 2009; Wallace et al., 2012).

Therefore in this study the researcher will pay attention to expressions of satisfaction with the experience in the destination. She will attempt to understand the role of exchange students' satisfaction with the experience in the destination towards their communication about it.

To see a summary of the literature review on brand equity see the Appendix "Literature review summary 3b**"**

In the next section the researcher will move beyond the elements that potentially prompt brand ambassadorship to review the literature on brand ambassadorship from another perspective, namely that of employees, in order to gain insights into the process of brand ambassadorship formation and brand ambassadorship behaviours.

2.3.2   Employee-based brand ambassadorships

To understand the potential of exchange students as destination brand ambassadors it is important to know how brand ambassadors are formed. Among the streams of literature on such processes, that of organization management assists in understanding the elements that can be acted upon to encourage brand ambassadorship. The employees of an organization are brand ambassadors when "*attitudinally* and *behaviourally* ready to deliver the brand promise" and exhibiting brand commitment and brand building behaviours (Xiong, King, & Piehler, 2013, p. 349).

The principles of organizational citizenship and internal brand building have some applicability to international students in explaining their role in place branding (Chen et al., 2015). Some limitations should be noted: normally employers have the authority to direct employee actions and to enact certain stimuli towards ambassadorship. Moreover, the benefits of the job influence employees' commitment to the brand. With reference to exchange students in this study, it is noted that destination and education authorities cannot exercise the same direct influence over exchange students, though they may prompt external stimuli to a relevant degree . For example, the liminality of the study abroad period gives exchange students a certain urgency to do things in the destination which the authorities can exploit. In addition, the host Universities can serve as gatekeepers to transfer stimuli onto exchange students.

There are two dimensions to employee brand ambassadorship: attitudes and behaviours. Both are stronger when they are intrinsically motivated, but may also be enhanced through third party stimuli such as the organization's efforts towards internal branding (Xiong & King, 2015). Intrinsic motivations and individual inherent psychological characteristics, such as receptiveness to the brand (King & Grace, 2012) and inherent interests (Xiong & King, 2015), can enhance the effectiveness of the internal branding strategies for brand ambassadorship. The push factors to embark on the exchange program are intrinsic needs for travel and fun, for socialization, for novelty, for personal growth and for escape (Lesjak et al., 2015; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). While there is scarce evidence to argue that such push factors are an intrinsic motivation to be ambassadors for the destination, ambassadorship is likely prompted by self-identification with and attachment to the destination developed over time with the destination experience (as discussed in the previous section on consumer brand ambassadorship).

Besides motivations, exchange students' personal characteristics may influence their willingness to champion the destination. They are also antecedents of successful acculturation processes, as the exchange students' personality may determine their coping with the challenges of intercultural contact (Schmitz, 2005; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). It seems therefore necessary to explore how personal characteristics interact with acculturation and destination brand ambassadorship.

2.3.2.1   Attitudes to brand ambassadorship

This section discusses employees' brand ambassadorship attitudes and clarifies how the relative principles are relevant to exchange student ambassadorship.

Employee brand ambassadorship attitudes comprise psychological attachment and a sense of belonging that stimulate considerable brand related efforts beyond formal job requirements (King & Grace, 2012; Xiong et al., 2013). Such attitudes are central to "brand commitment", the willingness to foster a durable and stable consumer-brand relationship by derogating the alternatives (Fournier, 1998). Brand commitment involves the feeling of psychological ownership and possessive experiences towards the corporate brand (Chiang, Chang, Han, & McConville, 2013, p. 56) and the perception of the brand as an extension of the self-concept (Chang, Chiang, & Han, 2012). It is through brand commitment that employees exhibit altruistic behaviours towards the brand (Chang et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2013). To achieve these situations there has to be congruence between the personality and values of the employees and of the brand (Chang et al., 2012; Xiong & King, 2015). If employees' psychological needs are satisfied by the organization brand, they identify with it and are more likely to display identity-congruent, and hence pro-brand, behaviours (Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009). Therefore, employee brand ambassadorship principles reflect consumer-based brand ambassadorship. For both, self-identification with the brand is a positive antecedent (Escalas, 2004a; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). In fact, identification with

the brand improves quality of the brand relationship (Fournier, 1998). In summary, research on brand ambassadorship maintains that individuals are encouraged to advocate for a brand if they can identify with it.

Exchange students' identification occurs through the destination pull factors that fulfil their self-expression and self-actualization aspirations, such as lifestyle (Balakrishnan et al., 2011; Lesjak et al., 2015). The same identification is represented by place attachment (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008).

A second relevant element to encourage brand ambassadorship is to encourage a sense of belonging. The literature on employee brand ambassadorship maintains that, if the brand environment is positively perceived, employees feel as members of the brand community in which their role is relevant, and their brand-related actions are effective. They will therefore identify with the brand community and develop psychological ownership towards the brand (King, Grace, & Funk, 2012; Morhart et al., 2009; Xiong et al., 2013). The sense of belonging is strictly related to the concept of identification. In fact, identification with a brand is the identification with what the brand stands for and with the relative human aggregate (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). This is also in line with social exchange theories, according to which employees who perceive their relationships with the brand community to be mutually beneficial will reciprocate with brand psychological ownership (Chiang et al., 2013). The current study investigates how a sense of belonging is developed while experiencing a destination, and how this is related to exchange students developing psychological ownership towards the destination's brand. It is expected that this will emerge from the process of acculturation. In fact, sojourners' emotional investment is influenced by the type of established social networks, and in particular by the extent and quality of socialization with members of the host culture (Bochner, 2006).

Brand psychological ownership depends also on the importance that employees attribute to the brand. Employees' perception that delivering the brand is meaningful to them results in pro-brand motivations (Xiong & King, 2015). If they perceive that their brand-related role is salient (Morhart et al., 2009) and that maintaining brand image is their responsibility (Chang et al., 2012), they are more likely to develop brand psychological ownership. Finally, for a successful brand ambassador formation process, the organization shall ensure knowledge transference (King & Grace, 2012) in order to satisfy the employees' need for competence (Morhart et al., 2009). Whether it results from employees' accumulated experience, intuition and judgement (Xiong et al., 2013), or it is provided by the organization, brand knowledge will ensure the transference of the brand values (Chiang et al., 2013) and provide guidance for pro-brand actions.

It may be anticipated that how exchange students evaluate their relationship with destination hosts, perceive their role within the destination community as "relevant" and perceive congruence between their personality and the destination brand values will inform their emotional attachment to the destination brand. Exchange students' sense of belonging to the destination will be positively affected also by the perceived meaningfulness attached to the destination brand.

In the following section, the types of behaviours that result from the above discussed attitudes and that have been identified by the employee-based brand ambassadorship literature will be shortly described.

2.3.2.2   Brand ambassador behaviours

By identifying with the brand, the employee progressively acquires brand commitment and psychological ownership. Such attitudes encourage brand altruistic spirit, brand reciprocation and validation of the self-concept through pro-brand behaviours. As a result, the organization achieves brand strength (Morhart et al., 2009), customer satisfaction (Chang

et al., 2012) and consumer based brand equity (Chiang et al., 2013). Such pro-brand behaviours have been referred to in various ways: brand championship (Morhart et al., 2009; Xiong & King, 2015), brand citizenship behaviours (Chang et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2013), employee brand equity (King et al., 2012) and brand ambassadorship (Xiong et al., 2013).

All denominations refer to the display of altruistic spirit and positive, extra-role and voluntary behaviours that advance the brand identity into the external environment, positively affecting customer-based brand equity (Chiang et al., 2013; King & Grace, 2012). To that end, employees can engage in brand endorsement and defence of the brand also in non-job-related situations (positive external brand communication, or WOM, outside of the organization's context), which constitutes a reliable source of advertising; advancement and display of enthusiasm (participation in the brand development and enhancement of its identity through customer feedbacks and innovative ideas); brand allegiance (the desire to maintain a relationship with the brand); sportsmanship ("forgiveness" towards the brand, represented by the fact that employees do not complain about inconveniences when it comes to brand related activities); and simple in-role brand consistent behaviours (meeting the standards set by the organization for their role and brand representatives) (Chang et al., 2012; King & Grace, 2012; Morhart et al., 2009; Xiong et al., 2013).

Brand behaviours may be reduced to discretionary, proactive and beyond norm behaviours that benefit the brand (Chang et al., 2012; King & Grace, 2012; Morhart et al., 2009). While tourism and educational institutions in the destination might not be able to single-handedly prompt tourist emotional attachments to the destination, there may be space for them to influence destination brand behaviours.

To see a summary of literature review on employee based ambassadorship please refer to Appendix "Literature review summary 3c**"**

In the following and last section of the literature review part of this, the researcher discusses issues related to destination brand ambassadorship and the media such ambassadorship is transmitted through.

2.3.3   Destination brand ambassadorship

This section will explore the literature that deals with WOM, recommendations, narrative and story-telling about destinations and will attempt to relate previous research in order to comprehensively contextualize destination brand ambassadorship.

2.3.3.1   Destination advancement through narratives

The marketing literature of the last decades has been critical of traditional advertising, arguing that it is now ineffective (Nyilasy, 2006). This applies not only to commercial products and services, but also to tourism destinations.

Destination recommendations and WOM have been progressively advanced as more effective marketing tools. They have been investigated from different angles, but research covered predominantly their antecedents. It has been suggested that the likelihood of recommending a destination "post-consumption" is primarily dependent on functional components of the destination brand, namely the tangible characteristics that relate to the core functions and to the ability to satisfy immediate practical needs (Balakrishnan et al., 2011). Sahin and Baloglu (2014) identified three components of destination image that positively affect WOM: affective image, cognitive image and destination personality. Each component gains more or less importance according to the tourist's previous travel experiences and motivation. Therefore destination marketing should reinforce the brand associations that are most likely to encourage the relevant segment (Sahin & Baloglu, 2014).

Following the above-mentioned principles, some localities established networks of ambassadors in order to promote the image of the place through people that have a real

connection with it (Andersson & Ekman, 2009; Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013). Yet, rather than by a sense of citizenship and pride toward the destination, ambassadors were motivated by benefits stemming from participation in the network (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013). Such benefits include the possibility of accessing information about the place first-hand, being involved in the place marketing process, and the opportunities to attend events and meetings, making new contacts and establishing new relationships (Andersson & Ekman, 2009). Though ambassadors were found to prioritize the enhancement of their own exposure and recognition among fellow participants, the network increased participants' sense of belonging to "something bigger" as a result of being part of the campaign, and promoted a greater sense of affection and connection to the destination (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013). The ambassadors did not actively advance the destination brand to others, but, as a consequence of exposure through the ambassador networks, they became receivers of interactions initiated by third parties. This points to the ambassadors' role as anchors for destination brand associations (Aaker, 1991).

One way for ambassadors to function as anchors is to share their own destination narratives. The previous sections have discussed how consumers with self-brand connections are more likely to exhibit ambassadorship. They will demonstrate better attitudes towards the brand and higher purchase intentions (Escalas, 2004a). Such self-brand connections can be formed also with cities (Kemp, Childers, & Williams, 2012). For example, when residents have positive attitudes towards the place brand, perceive the brand as quality and believe the brand is representative of the place's uniqueness, it will enter their self-concepts through the development of self-brand connections. Kemp et al. (2012) also argued that these connections potentially engender a strong civic sense and city's brand advocacy through word-of-mouth. Chen et al. (2015) argue that the most important antecedent of ambassadorship (in the form

of one-to-one and social media WOM) is experiential attachment to a destination. This is based on memories of interactions with the place and expectations of future experiences in it.

People who return from travel bring back a story in which they are protagonists, and use it to report, both to themselves and to others, their "emic interpretation of how, why, who, when, and where events unfold with what immediate and long-term consequences" (Woodside et al., 2007, p. 163). Tourists' first-person narratives capture what was significant for them and provide an approximation of what they will likely be telling their friends about the destination (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010). Similarly, students are likely to communicate their destination-related experiences through WOM and personal communications with family, friends and other social aggregates, as well as through social media (Chen et al., 2015; Lo & McKercher, 2015). Therefore destination marketers and managers can use visitors' narratives to understand if the experience in the destination turned them into ambassadors or dissuaders. According to Sahin and Baloglu (2014) contemporary destination marketing strategy development should focus on advocacy, particularly through WOM because of its wide reach via online dissemination. In fact destination managers seem to use the social media and web metrics to reach broader audiences in a relatively inexpensive manner and to create awareness about the destination, therefore contributing to the destination's brand equity (Zavattaro et al., 2015). Narratives communicated through WOM (whether online or offline) are recognized as solid foundations of effective destination marketing strategies (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008). Narrative is an effective marketing tool, in particular in the context of experience-laden products such as tourism and hospitality (Tussyadiah et al., 2011).

Online narratives are particularly relevant to the present study. The affordances of the technologies used by the Millennial generation determined not only a cultural shift, but also a new commercial logic that fosters people to invest their time and creativity online (Jansson,

2018). In fact, Millennial tourists can be thought of as self-published communities sharing their stories on blogs and social media through diaries, videos, images and exchanging opinions (Brondoni, 2016). Millennials are in fact immune to conventional marketing approaches and instead responsive to messages with a storytelling approach (Veiga et al., 2017). The following section will explain how narratives have a specific mechanism to create meaning, both for the story-teller and the audience, through their structure (Escalas, 2004a).

Riessman (2008) warns that "narrative is everywhere, but not everything is narrative" (p. 4). The everyday storytelling that links events consequentially into a sequence qualifies as narrative and can take the form of several types of texts such as spoken, written or visual (Riessman, 2008). In this study the narrative under investigation is seen both as a "process by which visitors make sense of their destination experience" and as a way to capture the story-teller's destination image through "the sense giving in recounting and narrating" (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010, p. 124). Narratives are effective in providing potential travellers with destination information upon which to make travel decisions through spontaneous and relatively unbiased reports of somebody's else experience with the destination (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008; Tussyadiah et al., 2011; Woodside et al., 2007). Episodes of the travellers' tales communicated through WOM will be incorporated by the listeners in the information dataset based on which they will form anticipations then carried into their future destination experiences (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010).

The efficacy of narratives lies in the fact that they encourage the audience to form a mental representation of consumption: this is facilitated by the recognition of coherence between the story being told and stories stored in the audience's memory (Tussyadiah et al., 2011). The advertising research finds that ad-encouraged mental representation of consumption scenarios (mental simulation) evokes a narrative thought structure (narrative processing) and narrative transportation (immersion into a story); these, in turn, positively

influence ad attitudes and brand evaluations (Escalas, 2004a). When engaging in somebody else's travel tale, individuals imagine their "self" experiencing the same things, therefore forming a mental simulation (Escalas, 2004a; Tussyadiah et al., 2011). The travel narrative structure allows the audience to hypothesize likely future travel scenarios because it results from the interlacing of the experience's temporal patterns and spatial movements into a sequence of episodes (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008). If the audience can identify with the story-teller's personal character and if they find coherence with their past experience, then their knowledge about the destination increases, which can lead to intention to visit it (Tussyadiah et al., 2011). In sum, narratives are good promotional tools because they encourage the audience to identify and feeling connected to a place is likely to encourage positive communication about it.

They are also a way to construct identities, a medium for people to tell themselves about who they are and who they are not in the stream of experience. In this sense, narratives, like identities, are fluid and becoming across contexts of retelling (Riessman, 2008). By narrating actions, attitudes and values of their personal character, tourist story-tellers recall vivid images of lived identities in the minds of listeners (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008). Tourist constructions of meaning around their experiences are affected by the audience and the context in which they are told (Smith, 2017). In fact, stories are selective and perspectival. They reflect moments that people choose to remember, forget, neglect and amplify.

2.3.3.2 Photography and the tourist gaze

To understand the kinds of communication entailed in visitor narratives and by what media they are conveyed, the researcher considered other types of narrative texts that are relevant to the destination experience. The centrality of vision and the sense of sight in the

tourist experience and the evolution of visual technological affordances call for investigations of visual narratives.

According to Urry (1990) tourists understand spaces by *gazing* at them: through the gaze they signpost objects worthy of attention and fix them spatially and temporally. Tourists choose to gaze upon scenes, landscapes or townscapes about which they have developed an anticipation that conveys sensorial experiences different from those ordinarily encountered (Urry & Larsen, 2011). This anticipation is insinuated in the tourists' minds through stimuli coming from several technologies, such as photography, TV and magazines (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

Photography plays a particularly important role in the production and consumption of tourism places (Scarles, 2014). From a destination ambassadorship perspective, it constitutes a form of communication about the destination that contributes to visibility, awareness and education (Zavattaro et al., 2015). The various emphases in photographs influence how tourists navigate, perceive and interpret destinations (McGregor, 2000). They may reproduce (or resist) particular "socially patterned and learnt" ways of seeing the world, hence materializing anticipations (Urry, 1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 3). For example, photographs can affect what places tourists choose to cast their gaze upon, which is why the developments of photography and tourist gaze are historically intertwined (McGregor, 2000; Urry & Larsen, 2011).

The researcher previously discussed how verbal narratives capture what is significant to tourists and what they will tell others about their experiences (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010). She also explained that the narrated stories are selective and perspectival because their meaning is affected by the audience and the context in which they are told (Smith, 2017). Similarly to what happens in the case of verbal narratives, when selecting the object of a photograph, the tourist selects moments to remember, forget, neglect and amplify

(Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004; Smith, 2017). Photographs are means to access the past by storing, memorializing and sharing individual or collective biographies (Emmison, Smith, & Mayall, 2012). When tourists pose for the camera, they present themselves and act according to social conventions, turning the visited places into theatres of a desired future atmosphere (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003, 2012). Tourists compose photographs based on anticipations of desired future memories, and select those that convey the impression that they wish to suggest taking account of preferred interests and affiliations (Emmison et al., 2012; Lo & McKercher, 2015). Thus, photographic compositions are quite consistent with conventions of beautiful scenery, joyful occasions and unique attractions, in order to elicit anticipated emotional responses (Andersson Cederholm, 2012).

All these emphases on how viewers will receive the photographs instantiate tourists' impression management through photography. Tourism photography is a tool of self-representation and narration of life as temporally and spatially embedded in the practices, objects and places of the tourist experience (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012). Photography is the theatre where tourists enact their aspired self-image (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Hence, narrative can take both a verbal and a pictorial form, and in both cases it constitutes a way for tourists to recall certain identities they upheld throughout their experience (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008). In fact, research that investigated tourist photography often viewed it as a form of performance better understood by adopting representational approaches that unearth the underlying cultural and social codes (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Haldrup & Larsen, 2003, 2012).

Technology-based changes have profoundly influenced how tourists photograph, narrate and experience places. As social media have evolved alongside communication technologies, the visual has become increasingly prioritized in the online world (Emmison et al., 2012). Time-space compression has brought people across the globe closer together

providing individuals with larger and more dispersed audiences for their self-projections (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Therefore, one of the consequences is that the performative nature of tourist photography is exacerbated. Social networks represent probably the most common photo-sharing media, and often tourists use several of them (Rodriguez Gonzalez et al., 2011). This narration of self through photography was confirmed by Lo and McKercher (2015), who found that young Hong Kong travellers' decisions of what images to upload on their social media prioritize the expression of their desired self-image rather than the destination and the travel experience. Awareness of such impression management tactics being employed in the taking, selecting and sharing of tourists photography was implicit or explicit at the different stages of the process (Lo & McKercher, 2015).

In this context the original interpretation of the tourist gaze became somehow a contradiction of the globalized world: while tourism mobility transcended borders, the tourist gaze depended on the search for the exotic often paralleled with the maintenance of bordered identities and the preservation of pre-modern and undeveloped authenticities (Cavanaugh, 2008). According to the most recent interpretation (*Tourist Gaze 3.0*), gazing is not only a "socially constructed [way of] seeing", but also a "discursive determination" of the tourist experience (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 2). As the concept of the tourist gaze evolved, discussions of tourist-produced visuals shifted from an *ocularcentric* paradigm to a holistic view that integrates the five senses. Researchers surpassed understandings of the tourist gaze as a practice of observation and of overarching gazes that collected and accumulated visual evidence of politicized anticipations of place (Scarles, 2014). Tourist experiences of place include all the "encounters with the social, material, spiritual and moral fabrics of particular places" (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Grimwood, Arthurs, & Vogel, 2015, pp. 362-363). They involve fluid and dynamic interrelationships of performances, practices and processes that

cannot be easily compartmentalized (Scarles, 2009). As an implicit element of the tourism experience, photography is the embodied expression of how the tourist produces, consumes and communicates places (Scarles, 2009, 2012). Hence, photographic gestures are not confined to the seen, but extend to the other senses and to "corporeal uniqueness" beyond expression through language.

2.3.3.3   Ambassadorship through online tourist photographs

The above literature review sections have clarified two main points regarding online tourist photography. Firstly, photographs are powerful tools in the hands of destination ambassadors especially in the era of digitisation and internetisation. Online tourist generated photographs are inexpensive tools that could be used to monitor tourists' perceived destination brand image and to determine what are their brand associations (Zavattaro et al., 2015). Tourist-generated photographs are essential part of the hermeneutic cycle of tourist gaze, in that they contribute to the destination's image, which in turn determines what is worth going to see and to photograph in a holiday, turning "sites into sights" (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

Secondly, tourist-produced photographs are powerful narrative tools of the tourist experience because they embody senses, affections and emotions, which earned them the name of *"embodied visualities"* (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003; Scarles, 2009, p. 466; 2012). Photographic embodiments manifest themselves through the "as if" that allows the viewer to sense what the subject of the photograph feels like (Scarles, 2009). In embodying manifestations of everyday life as they unfold through travel (Jensen, 2016) tourist photography constructs place as a negotiation between the tourist and the place and from the "proprioception of fragments of reality" of the tourist experience (Scarles, 2009, p. 471; 2014). Tourist places are a hybridity of home and away, a result of the interweaving of imminent subjective encounters; previous collective discourses; and the narratives that are

produced by tourists when constructing their social identities (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Scarles, 2009).

The embodiment of imminent encounters within photographs is amplified by the mobile technologies affordances that allow millions of tourist-photographers to upload visual materials that simultaneously capture lived moments and projected memories (Emmison et al., 2012; Scarles, 2009, 2012). Hence photographs can represent how tourists respond to and accommodate experiences literally as they unfold. Such immediacy of visual communication is a strong instance of globalization, which Kress (2010) defines as the "conditions which make it possible for characteristics of one place to be present and active in another" (p. 6). Places can be distributed quickly, cheaply and at-a-distance through online images that encapsulate the narrative of the tourist experience: this way places can be consumed without being co-present by the audience that is part of the more or less close network of the photographer's online sociality (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

To see a summary of literature on destination brand ambassadorship refer to Appendix "Literature Review Summary 3d"

2.3.4 Definition of Destination Ambassadorship Behaviours

For data collection purposes, the details will be discussed in the third part of this study. The researcher needs to define the manifestation of destination ambassadorships. The way destination ambassadorship manifests itself will be represented by exchange student behaviours that are here called "Destination Ambassadorship Behaviours". They can be deduced from the literature on brand ambassadorship discussed until now. Below, the researcher provides a summary and a definition. In addition, as discussed in the previous literature review sections, the researcher here assumes that the brand of the place is borne by the place name, hence Hong Kong, which is in itself capable of recalling brand associations and the destination's organic image. In fact, the researcher previously gave a definition of

destination brand suited for the purposes of this study as *"the destination's place name, i.e. Hong Kong".*

First, the researcher discussed the literature on consumer brand ambassadorships. One way of looking at destination ambassadorship is as an expression of brand loyalty. In fact, one way to demonstrate brand loyalty is through behaviours that include communication *about* the brand and recommendation of the brand to others. This provides brand exposure , and leads to brand awareness (Aaker, 1991). Similarly, the destination brand literature identifies positive WOM about the destination and recommending the destination to others as a display of destination brand loyalty (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013; Hui et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2015). Visitors use WOM to communicate destination related experiences, both as personal communication or through social media (Chen et al., 2015; Lo & McKercher, 2015). Such first-person accounts and narratives are effective promotional tools destinations can benefit from (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008; Tussyadiah et al., 2011; Woodside et al., 2007). Therefore consumers who actively advance the brand towards the external environment constitute brand "living advertising spaces", also called advocates (Wragg, 2004, p. 37). In place branding literature they are identified as place brand ambassadors and described as people who promote the places' image (Andersson & Ekman, 2009). One way of promoting a places image is through social media, where individuals relate the place brand to their (online) identity (Wallace et al., 2012) and therefore serve as anchors for associations about that brand. As such, social media represent a valuable means for destination WOM dissemination (Zavattaro et al., 2015).

The second step in discussing brand ambassadorship has been the review of the literature on employee-based brand ambassadorship, following the assumption that exchange students are not only consumers but also temporary residents in the destination, and therefore can play a role in destination branding as internal stakeholders. Brand ambassadorship has

73

been described as the advancing of the brand to the external environment. This can occur through: brand endorsement (positive external brand communication also in non-job related situations); WOM; brand allegiance (desire to maintain a relationship with the brand) (Morhart et al., 2009; Xiong et al., 2013); enthusiasm (extra-role behaviours); sportsmanship (the tendency not to complain about inconveniences when it comes to brand related activities); and advancement (enhancement of the brand identity through customer feedbacks and innovative ideas) (Chang et al., 2012).

Hence brand ambassadorship consists of employees' altruistic, positive, extra-role and voluntary brand behaviours, which positively affect customer-based brand equity (Chiang et al., 2013; King & Grace, 2012).

In the last part of the literature review on brand ambassadorship, the researcher explored forms of destination brand ambassadorship, particularly narratives (or first-person stories) and online photographs. She has discussed how self-representation plays an important role in how stories and photographs are composed and shared, and how the possibility to identify with the narrator facilitates the formulation of scenarios about the destination experience.

The researcher draws from these main concepts of ambassadorship to design an *ad hoc* definition of destination brand ambassadorship behaviour to suit the purpose of the current study. Destination ambassadorship behaviours are here referred to as

"the discretionary actions of communication about the destination to the external environment. They consist of the exchange students' narratives about their destination experience. Destination brand ambassadorship behaviours can manifest themselves through WOM (in personal communication or through social media), and through photographs (shared on social media)".

2.4   Definitions

In the following table the researcher summarizes the literature on the main concepts treated, and provides the definitions set for the current

research purposes.

Table 1 - Definitions

Concept	Literature's inputs	Current study definitions
International students	People who move to places different from their country of normal residence with the intention to carry out either part or the whole of their degree and who will return home upon completion of their studies (Carr & Axelsen, 2009); Hence, their stay is characterized by a predetermination to return home (Carr & Axelsen, 2009) Compared to domestic tourists, they demonstrate greater willingness to explore and travel the country as much as possible because of time considerations (Gardiner et al., 2013; Michael et al., 2003) They are willing to adjust to the culture prevalent in the destination and to acquire culturally specific knowledge through the course of the experience (Brown, 2009; Freestone & Geldens, 2008); They are consumers to the host University as well as to the destination itself (Cubillo et al., 2006); In terms of acculturation, they belong to the acculturating group of sojourners, together with tourists and expatriates (Berry, 2006; Bochner, 2006).	International students are people who seek education in a country other than that of normal residence. They return home upon completion of the study period at the host institution. They tend to make the most of their stay and travel and explore extensively the study destination. Therefore, they are consumers not only to the host institution, but also to the destination. In addition, they seek to acquire knowledge of the destination-specific culture. They belong to the same acculturating group as tourists and expatriates, namely that of sojourners.
Exchange students	Exchange students are the sub-group of international students that are "credit-seeking" (IAU, 2015); They travel to the host country for one or two semesters with the aim to gain credits for a portion of their academic career at a university that has a partnership with their home institution (Freestone & Geldens, 2008; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008); Therefore, the exchange student stay occurs in the framework of on-going studies in the country of the home institution, where they are credited and enrolled (EUROSTAT, 2015b); For tourism statistical purposes, they qualify as visitors, because they undertake courses in the host country for less than one year (UNWTO, 2008, pp. 20-21). In fact the student exchange can be considered as an additional model of tourism (Rodríguez et al., 2012). A relatively wide array of literature suggests that exchange students decision to undertake the exchange program is supported by travel needs and that the choice of the destination is influenced by	Exchange students are a sub-group of international students traveling to a destination abroad to carry out part of their studies, typically for at least one semester and less than a year. Because of the duration of their stay can be considered tourists whose motivations are both academic and travel related. Their consumption patterns resemble both those of tourists and of residents, yet they contribute to the destination economy by spending money from outside. Their acculturation process is ambivalent too, in

Concept	Literature's inputs	Current study definitions
	tourist attributes (Freestone & Geldens, 2008; Juvan & Lesjak, 2011; Lesjak et al., 2015; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Rodriguez Gonzalez et al., 2011; Rodríguez et al., 2012; Teichler, 2004) They are comparable to long stay tourists because their stay duration significantly exceeds that of the average tourist (Freestone & Geldens, 2008; Rodríguez et al., 2012). Like educational tourists, they spend money that originates outside the destination on accommodation, food, travel and leisure (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Roppolo, 1996; UNESCO, 2013); yet, exchange students consumer patterns are more akin to those of the destination residents rather than those of conventional tourists (Rodríguez et al., 2012); Apart from resembling a tourism phenomenon, they resemble an "institutional migration", with a destination choice limited to the set of agreements established by the home institution with foreign institutions (Beine et al., 2014); Like international students, they tend to be willing to adjust to the culture prevalent in the destination and to acquire culturally specific knowledge through the course of the experience (Brown, 2009; Freestone & Geldens, 2008);	that they are sojourners ascribable to both international students and tourists.
Sojourners	Berry (2006) defines sojourners as individuals that take up residence in the host country temporarily, for a set purpose in a variety of roles; Bochner (2006) adds that they are temporary and *voluntary* migrants "who travel abroad to attain a particular goal, within a specific period of time" (p. 181). From an acculturation point of view, the awareness about the predetermined and impending return home might make them hesitate to get emotionally involved with the host society or refrain them from identifying with it, therefore making them worth of separate examination (Berry, 2006; Bochner, 2006).	Sojourners are people traveling to and residing in a country for a specific purpose and a pre-determined period of time, whose acculturation process is affected by the awareness of their impending return.
Acculturation	At its simplest level acculturation consists of "all the changes that arise following 'contact' between individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds" (Sam, 2006, p. 11); Acculturation also refers to the process of groups and individuals negotiating the retention of their own culture and the adoption of the host culture (Berry, 2006); "[a]cculturation involves contact that takes place at both group and individual levels leading to changes which for the individual entail affective, behavioral and cognitive changes […] and subsequent long-term modification of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation." (Sam, 2006, p. 21); At the individual level, acculturation is called "psychological acculturation", and refers to the active coping with the situations experienced when confronted with a different culture and the resulting changes in dimensions such as identity, values, attitudes and behaviours (Berry, 2005; Schmitz, 2005); Influencing factors of acculturation for sojourners include timeframe, purpose, sojourners' willingness to participate in and attitudes towards the host society, host society's attitudes towards sojourners, perceived cultural distance between sojourners and host society, and emotional investment	Acculturation is the process and outcome of change due to the exchange students' encounter with the host culture. The process consists in the negotiation between retention of the own culture and adoption of the host culture. At the individual level, acculturation refers to the exchange student's active coping with the situations experienced in the destination and to the resulting changes in identity, values, attitudes, behaviour and life satisfaction.

Concept	Literature's inputs	Current study definitions
	of sojourners in the host society (Bochner, 2006; Rasmi et al., 2014; Schmitz, 2005). International students mobility is based on the contact hypothesis that culture contact reduces conflicts by overcoming ignorance about the other cultures (Bochner, 2006). Hence, international students' acculturation is strongly influenced by its purposes, the achievement of mutual cross-cultural understanding (Bochner, 2006) multicultural skills and host culture awareness (Juvan & Lesjak, 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008); Integrated international students will perform better, be less anxious, feel more self-esteem, be more satisfied with the overall sojourn (Bochner, 2006) and will display enhanced outward interaction during their stay (Rasmi et al., 2009). Besides international students, tourists can be studied from an acculturation perspective too, and categorized based on the chose acculturation strategy. The latter represents the extent to which they forgo the origin culture and take in the host culture (Rasmi et al., 2014).	
Consumer acculturation	Consumer acculturation refers to the processes and outcomes of change and adaptation triggered by cultural contact as manifest in the marketplace. In particular it refers to the process of learning and selecting certain consumption skills, knowledge and behaviours typical of the host consumption culture. Hence consumer acculturation is a subset of acculturation (Berry, 2005; Penaloza, 1989; Sam, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).	Consumer acculturation refers to the exchange student process and outcome of change in skills, knowledge and behaviours relative to consumption in the destination.
Brand Advocacy	Brand advocacy is considered the root of WOM and consists in the consumers' active sharing with others of their experience with the brand and the associated lifestyle (Wragg, 2004)	Destination brand ambassadorship is the active advancing into the external environment of communication regarding the destination experience and the associated lifestyle. It is an unsolicited and proactive behaviour that takes the form of verbal or visual narrative, both in person or online.
Word-of-mouth (WOM)	Is defined as the "oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator, whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service" (Nyilasy, 2006, p. 164). WOM is a communication channel, deemed to be the most effective for marketing communication (Keller, 2007; Wragg, 2004).	
Visitor's Narrative	Narrative is the everyday storytelling linking events consequentially into a sequence. It can take the form of several types of texts such as spoken, written or visual (Riessman, 2008). Narratives are also a way to construct identities, a medium for people to tell themselves about who they are and who they are not in the stream of experience. Hence narratives, like identities, are fluid and becoming across contexts of retelling (Riessman, 2008). Hence narrative is both a "process by which visitors make sense of their destination experience" and a way to capture the story-teller's destination image through "the sense giving in recounting and narrating" (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010, p. 124). Tourists' narratives capture what was significant for them and provide an approximation of what they will likely be telling their friends about the destination (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010). Narrative is therefore an effective marketing tool in the context of experience-laden products such as tourism and hospitality because they encourage the audience to form a mental representation of consumption (Tussyadiah et al., 2011).	

Concept	Literature's inputs	Current study definitions
Place + Destination Image	Place image is "the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places" evoked by a place name. "Images represent a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with a place. They are a product of the mind trying to process and pick out essential information from huge amounts of data about a place" (Kotler et al., 1993); Similarly, the destination image is the product of the individual's interpretation of the destination messages accumulated through a variety of stakeholders and via a multiplicity of communication media (Balakrishnan et al., 2011; Tasci & Kozak, 2006).	Destination image is the sum of beliefs, impressions and associations about the destination evoked by its name. Destination image results from individuals' interpretations of the accumulated information from different sources, among which the exchange students' communication. As such, exchange students ambassadorship contributes to the formation of Hong Kong's organic image.
Organic image	An organic image is the combination of the audience's accumulated impressions about how rewarding or disappointing a destination may be (Gunn, 1997). It creates a strong brand association (Balakrishnan et al., 2011) The organic image is formed through the consolidation and assimilation over time of the individual's interpretation of information from different sources, among which WOM narratives play an important role (Gunn, 1997);	
Induced Image	Induced images, as opposed to organic images, are the result of intentional campaigns to attract tourists to certain destinations and are usually consequences of tourism-trade promotions and publicities (Gunn, 1997).	
Brand Relationship	The brand relationship concept is based on the idea that the brand has a personality, with which the consumer can establish a relationship (Hankinson, 2004). The relationship results from the congruity between the consumer's self-image and the brand, or between consumer's needs and the brand functional and symbolic attributes (Hankinson, 2004). In fact, the consumer-brand relationship's quality is enhanced by: self-connection, understood as the degree to which the brand can express relevant aspects of the consumer's self-concept; and interdependence, defined as frequency of interactions with the brand, consumption rituals and the brand being interwoven into the consumer's daily life (Fournier, 1998). The interpretation of brand as a relationship is particularly relevant to services brands because the encounter, understood as interaction between service provider and customer, is central to the brand delivery (Hankinson, 2004)	Destination relationship is the outcome of the encounter between the exchange students and the destination in terms of self-identification based on rituals, repeated interactions and continuous encounters with the destination's space and society.
Destination brand	A place name is a brand in itself, in that it is capable of eliciting the audience's perceptions about the place's reputation (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, 2011); Because place names have been around for a long time, even when the place's brand is not consciously managed, simply voicing the place's name can recall certain associations into people's minds (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, 2011).	The destination brand corresponds to the destination's name, i.e. Hong Kong, used in exchange students accounts of the destination brand relationship, and capable of evoking Hong Kong's image.
Brand Ambassadorship Behaviours	Destination brand ambassadors are people who promote the places' image (Andersson & Ekman, 2009). At the basis of ambassadorship there is advocacy. An advocate a "living advertising space" for a brand (Wragg, 2004, p. 37); The literature identified many brand-related behaviours that constitute brand ambassadorship. They all refer to the display of altruistic spirit and positive, extra-role and voluntary behaviours that	Destination brand ambassadorship behaviours are here identified as the discretionary communication about the destination to the external environment that provide exposure.

Concept	Literature's inputs	Current study definitions

	advance the brand identity into the external environment, positively affecting customer-based brand equity (Chiang et al., 2013; C. King & Grace, 2012).
	
	    Namely:
	    - Brand commitment, which is manifested, among other ways, through communication *about* the brand and recommendation of the brand to others. Therefore brand commitment provides brand exposure and encourages brand awareness (Aaker, 1991);
	    - extra-role brand endorsement and defence of the brand (positive brand communication, or WOM, outside of the organization's brand context);
	    - advancement and display of enthusiasm (participation in the brand development and enhancement of its identity through customer feedbacks and innovative ideas);
	    - brand allegiance (the desire to maintain a relationship with the brand);
	    - sportsmanship ("forgiveness" towards the brand, represented by not complaining about inconveniences when it comes to brand related activities);
	    - and simple in-role brand consistent behaviours (meeting the standards set by the organization for their role and brand representatives)
	    (Chang et al., 2012; C. King & Grace, 2012; Morhart et al., 2009; Xiong et al., 2013).
	
	    Brand behaviours may be reduced to discretionary, proactive and beyond norms behaviours that benefit the brand (Chang et al., 2012; C. King & Grace, 2012; Morhart et al., 2009).
	    Besides consumer brands, destination brand loyalty too can be demonstrated through positive WOM about the destination and recommending the destination to others (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2013; Hui et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2015); In particular, first-person narratives are effective marketing tools destinations can benefit from (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008; Tussyadiah et al., 2011; Woodside et al., 2007);
	    To communicate destination related experiences visitors can use WOM both as one-to-one communications or through social media (Chen et al., 2015; Lo & McKercher, 2015); Through social media individuals can relate the brand to their (online) identity (Wallace et al., 2012) and therefore serve as anchors for associations about that brand.
		They consist of the exchange students' narrative, first-person stories and other communications about their destination experience. Destination brand ambassadorship behaviours can manifest themselves through WOM (in personal communication or through social media), and through photographs (shared on social media);

3   <u>Methodology</u>

In this chapter the researcher will explain the methods that have been chosen to address the various research questions. She first describes the fundamental beliefs that form a basis for investigating and explaining reality. Hence Section 3.1 clarifies:

- the ontological approach - explaining *what is reality* for study purposes;

- the epistemological approach - *what and how can be uncovered about reality.*

- the theoretical perspective - an explanation of *what approach can be used to gather knowledge about reality.*

Next, the researcher will present a conceptual framework which sets the scene for the empirical component of the study. She then explains her choices of procedures and tools to acquire the relevant knowledge, consisting in this case of longitudinal research practices. Finally, the researcher provides details of the procedure followed by an analysis of verbal and visual data.

3.1   Research philosophy and approach

To address the research question the author has adhered a set of beliefs (research philosophy or paradigm) and then considers their implications.

Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2011) distinguish between positivist and interpretive paradigms. The former concentrate on objective measurements of social issues, based on their understanding of reality as consisting of observable and measurable facts. Interpretive paradigms, by contrast, account for the contextual influences on people's lives. Reality may be understood as the meanings that people attach to their lived experiences. Reality is therefore constructed in people's social, cultural, historical and personal contexts. This study adopts a particular interpretive paradigm: the constructivist approach. The researcher follows

80

Guba and Lincoln (1994) definition. A constructivist research paradigm is characterized by a relativist ontology. This implies that the researcher believes there are multiple realities, which are social and experiential constructions, created through interactions between people. The understanding of this world is people's construction shaped by their assumptions and previous experiences, as well as by the realities with which they interact (Maxwell, 2013). The constructivist paradigm emphasizes the situated-ness of the investigated realities and is a suitable paradigm for researchers with aims that extend beyond the representational.

According to constructivism, knowledge emerges from interactions amongst informants and between the researcher and each informant. Therefore, the constructivist epistemology maintains that knowledge is context and time sensitive. Knowledge concerns *the way* people make meaning in their lives, not just *that* they make meaning and what meaning they make. The constructivist researcher is a *passionate participant* who facilitates the understanding of constructions of reality and the reaching of a relative consensus regarding constructs.

One implication of the constructivist methodology is that research processes are viewed as hermeneutic cycles. Reality is progressively re-analysed for the purposes of enhancing inquiry. They are also dialectical in that constructions are refined through interactions between researchers and informants. The findings of constructivist research constitute progress in that they lead to the formulation of more informed and sophisticated constructs than previously existed. The present researcher has been careful to ensure that the theory discussed in the previous sections does not prematurely overshadow the empirical evidence that is collected. Rather, theory is used to best inform analysis by working incrementally and in close relation to the evidence emerging from the empirical component (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

The researcher accepts that all of the phenomena in the present study are manifest to different extents, in different ways and with different connotations. For example, differences

may occur between respondents based on how much of their communication is about Hong Kong or is about the student exchange experience; based on whether the communications are positive or negative; and based on the intensity, frequency and audiences of such communication. Similarly, respondents can manifest different degrees of acculturation, ranging from absent to total. The relationship with the destination same is a similar case. None of these possibilities represent study limitations, but rather they are instances of multiple processes and interactions between them. They are possibilities which constitute part of the findings, as they answer "the *how* question" regarding such processes. This is consistent with qualitative research, whereby there is no need to test an expectation (or hypothesis) (Silvermann, 2011, in Ritchie et al., 2014). In qualitative research, the fact that the phenomenon manifests itself to a lesser or greater degree does not affect the salience of the findings, rather it responds to the characteristics of qualitative research to provide an in-depth understanding of the social world and the meanings that respondents attribute to it.

Having explained the researcher's ontological and epistemological stance, the following paragraphs to explain the approach that was used to gather knowledge about reality. Hence, in the following section the researcher explains the "more-than-representational" research approach. Tourism research methodologies have typically been geared towards the explanation, understanding and representation of tourist places, activities and attitudes. Therefore the academic inclination has been to assume that meanings and values *await* discovery, interpretation, judgement and representation by the researcher (Lorimer, 2005). To this aim, researchers have imposed fixed structures of meaning onto the world, thereby engaging in *representational research* (Xiao, Jafari, Cloke, & Tribe, 2013). Because it seeks explanations, representational research cannot access embodied emotions, performances and affects, or attend to "the visceral experiences, atmospheres, vibes, emotions, and affective capacities" of tourism (Xiao et al., 2013, p. 376). It is argued here

that representational researchers close off discussion prematurely about the preconscious and nonconscious making of reality, its ineffable and affective aspects, as well as its onflow (Bajde, 2013; Hill, Canniford, & Mol, 2014; Xiao et al., 2013). In fact the makings of reality are "ongoing, multiple and precarious" (Bajde, 2013, p. 237), hence shaped and expressed through phenomena that may at first appear insignificant but are relevant local, situated conditions of the lives being researched (Lorimer, 2005).

Non-representational researchers are able to address such limitations. They investigate the preconscious, subconscious or nonconscious unfolding of experiences (Xiao et al., 2013), for example by considering the things that may evade interviewees' conscious awareness (Hill et al., 2014). This implies that there should not be a pre-existent nature or culture to be revealed or experienced, but rather assemblages that are constructed heterogeneously: both socially *and* materially (Bajde, 2013). One way to investigate such realities is for the researcher to foreground the *automatic knowledge* that orchestrates human behaviours. Hence research should not assume that humans are guided by the meanings behind their actions, but also consider the role played by habits and the way they are triggered in the interactions with the environment (Highmore, 2010).

A proponent of non-representational theories, Thrift (2008) suggests that researchers should pay more attention to the unreflexive experiences and to how humans are often prepared for action in a bodily manner, before they are aware of their actions. Hence, researchers should emphasise the automatic knowledge that drives actions within the *onflow* of everyday life (Hill et al., 2014). Non-representational theories are well suited for the inquiry of such "continual movement and processes of everyday life, especially with respect to the affective and sensual registers of the human body" (Hill et al., 2014, p. 384). In fact, they not only attend to the affective performances and atmospheres of a particular place or event, but also place the investigated phenomena within the everyday life onflow (Hill et al.,

2014; Xiao et al., 2013). Non-representational approaches attempt to capture the ongoing flow of everyday life (Hill et al., 2014). Researchers have argued for ethnographies that seek to expand on research sites, contexts and samples by seeking out novel ways to describe and track the distributed world of consumption. Non-representational theory specifically recommends attention to the automatic and precognitive aspects of market societies as well as the atmospheres and affect that circulate in consumption spaces.

The researcher suggests that non-representational work can be placed alongside existing representational styles of relational theorising. Hence this study employs a hybrid approach open to both representational and non-representational sensibilities. As a result, non-representational research addresses the *sensoriality* of the experience both of the researchers and of the respondents (Pink, 2012, 2015). This affects methods in a way that non-representational researchers do not rely solely on retrospective sense making from post-event data collection. Instead they also chronicle phenomena as they unfold, and their methods remain fluid and ready to respond to material objects and flows that demand closer attention. Hence non-representational research describes consumption experiences in terms of *ongoing* movements of bodies, spaces and objects together (Hill et al., 2014).

In the present study, the researcher responds to calls for the study of the sensoriality and onflow of experiences, and therefore follows non-representational approaches. The researcher also recognizes that consumption phenomena are symmetrically and simultaneously material and sociocultural. This demands that the researcher refrains from imposing *a priori* hierarchies and discontinuities and rather reflects on how 'context' is enacted in consumption (Bajde, 2013). The researcher wants to prevent the representational tendency to terminate discussion prematurely about the ongoing, multiple and precarious makings of reality and to neglect the sensoriality of experiences. Therefore, she chooses an ontological and epistemological stance that is open to both the material and sociocultural

experiencing of a destination. In fact, non-representational styles of thinking are by no means anti-representational *per se* (Anderson & Harrison, 2010). They invite the researcher to go beyond obsessions with representation and meaning which tend to emphasize fixed and bounded understandings, and instead reach out to that which is in a state of becoming. The concern is not necessarily with representations and meanings themselves, but rather with previous researchers' inability to conceive of ways to bring them together (Xiao et al., 2013).

The present study is *more-than-representational*, in that it investigates the meanings behind human actions by considering how nonconscious automatic knowledge and the senses are partly responsible for how these actions occur. It acknowledges that "phenomena take shape through locally situated practice" (Lorimer, 2005). As will be explained later, the researcher tackles meaning and materiality through different methodologies and achieves the more-than-representational aims by bringing them together. By employing the acculturation and destination relationship frameworks, the researcher investigates meanings and sociocultural aspects ambassadorship. Through the use of narrative analysis and visual composition analysis the researcher attends to the sensorial experiencing of Hong Kong ambassadorships. The latter two methods of analysis allow consideration of communications about Hong Kong in its capacity of message at face value, and to experience the affective impact that they trigger. Finally, through the triangulation of visual and narrative analyses the researcher addresses the research question directly and speculates on potential meanings behind the results based on the chosen frameworks.

3.2   Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework represents the researcher's organization of the main concepts that have been explained in the literature review, relative to the phenomenon of study (Maxwell, 2013). First, the researcher situates the population of interest (exchange students) in a new frame of reference. Exchange students are the protagonists of multiple

interrelated processes, and the sources of various communications about the destination. Therefore, the researcher views them as involved in three main processes: acculturation, relationship with the destination and ambassadorship. They are contextualized in the student exchange.

Exchange students are misplaced from home and consequently reside in a different country and culture transitorily yet for a prolonged period. Their situation prompts an acculturation process that unfolds through the exchange. During this period, the student has daily interactions with society and spaces within the destination. The accumulated daily encounters form the basis for the formation of a relationship with the destination. The quality of this relationship is likely affected by the exchange student's perceived self-identification with Hong Kong and satisfaction with the experience. Based on acculturation and relationship factors, the ES constructs and advances the everyday storytelling of their experience, which they weave into a narrative sequence that extends beyond selected events into evolving identities.

The study aims to capture and to draw conclusions from the unfolding of these processes in the stream of experience, with particular reference to the implications for destination ambassadorships. Figures 1 and 2 below visualize the unfolding of the processes with a focus on their simultaneity and interconnectedness. While Figure 1 is a conceptual representation, Figure 2 is a purely visual effort to provide a comprehensive scene of the student exchange.

Figure 1 is a way for the researcher to visually convey the main contributions of the study. According to the constructivist approach reality is created in the mind of the individual based, among other factors, on contextual social and cultural events. The methodological choice of carrying out longitudinal data collection reflects the willingness to observe the reality constructed in the individual's mind across different context. Previous research, in

contrast, has mostly drawn upon one-off data collection methods. The figure also emphasise another novel element of the current research, which is the ability to consider phenomena under investigation in their virtue of processes. A timeline is proposed at the foot of Figure 1, to highlight the phases preceding and following the actual presence in the destination, and the main phase of the student exchange. Above the timeline, the area representing the student exchange covers the entire time period. This is a visualization of all aspects of the student exchange gathered from the literature by the researcher. Destination brand ambassadorship is represented by an area that covers the whole exchange period. This is because the researcher observes and collects exchange student communications about the destination throughout the whole period to uncover if and how it changes, along with the interweaving between acculturation and relationship with the destination. Acculturation and relationship are represented in the visualization using a chain which highlights the focus on interconnectedness. The pre- and post- phases of the exchange experience are characterized by the labels Anticipation and Recollection. Anticipation refers to all that is relevant as inputs into the various processes of the experience, such as the personal characteristics of the exchange students; their previous overseas experience; their organic image of Hong Kong; expectations from the experience and from the destination Conversely, Recollection refers to the outcomes of the experience, such as changes at the individual level, considerations of the experience against expectations, and creation of memories. In the context of the student exchange the processes of acculturation and relationship interweave with each other from its inception to its end. Ambassadorship is an overarching process, an outcome of everything that is represented below, and evolves through the stream of experience.

In Figure 2 the researcher presents the phenomenon that is under investigation using a pictorial representation. While the use of the timeline is consistent, this representation focuses on separating the studied individual and place in the pre- and post- phases, and

emphasises the navigation of the city by the student. It is an essential part of the study to interpret student encounters within the destination as multisensorial experiences. In line with the afore-mentioned more-than-representational aims, the researcher accommodates the material and sociocultural situated-ness of the experience's events. The chosen emphasis allows the researcher to illuminate how student communications about the place are tied inextricably to the way that they navigate and consume it (Scarles, 2009, 2012). Hong Kong ambassadorships cannot be understood separately from the unfolding of the acculturation and relationship processes. In addition, ambassadorship of Hong Kong is here considered for its capacity to embody the senses awakened while navigating the destination. Finally, Figure 2 highlights the permanence of ambassadorship as a spin-off of the other processes unfolding, and it highlights both its verbal and visual forms.

The researcher presents the proposed conceptual framework over a simple timeline for the following reason. Through the previous decades, research on acculturation has increasingly challenged the use of models, such as Lysgaard (1955) original U-curve model of adjustment that reduced the acculturation process to a predictable course of events. A growing body of published research has suggested that the acculturation process is an unpredictable and dynamic process that is underpinned by individual psychological and cultural characteristics (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Therefore, it is problematic to anticipate the timing or the phases associated with the exchange student acculturation process. Acculturation research has grown to advocate a stronger focus on the psychological and sociocultural processes and outcomes of adjustment (Ward et al., 2001) rather than on a formalisation of time.

The proposed timeline of the student exchange experience starts with the arrival and ends with the date of departure. The current study aims to provide a more detailed description. As of now, the most applicable concept is that destination ambassadorship is a longitudinal

process that can be understood through the lens of the acculturation process and on the basis of an evolving relationship with the destination. Each destination ambassadorship instance will be interpreted on the basis of its contingent context, as an outcome of the interweaving of acculturation and relationships. Ambassadorship presents itself in the form of accounts about the destination experience and about the exchange student lifestyle. It may be manifest through narratives via personal communications, through online and social media narratives, or through photographic narratives. The researcher will use semi-structured in-depth interviews to investigate exchange student verbal narratives, will explore visual narratives by collecting photographs shared on social media and will elicit their clarifications about the visuals during the interviews.

The researcher will account for the various factors that have been proposed in the literature as influencing all three processes of acculturation, relationship and ambassadorship. Firstly, consideration will be given to the personal characteristics of the respondents: their receptiveness towards the destination experience may be influenced by their previous travel or acculturation experiences, by their motivations and by their psychological characteristics. The outcomes of acculturation include, amongst other things, changes at the individual exchange student level, such as identity and values: these should be monitored to understand their perceived selves, and as a consequence, their identification (or not) with the destination and their self-representation through destination ambassadorship behaviours. The two latter aspects should also be interpreted in light of the actual or aspirational membership of certain reference groups amongst exchange students. Tracking the acculturation aspects of negotiation between cultures and of the chosen acculturation strategies will allow a better understanding of exchange student' behaviours over time and their satisfaction with the destination experience. Finally, it is acknowledged that various other characteristics may vary over time, such as their emotional investment, sense of belonging to the destination

community and sense of place. These may affect the ease of acculturation and of identification with the destination and its society. It is anticipated that these various aspects will emerge through investigating the visual and verbal narratives of the exchange students.

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework: a map of the student exchange process
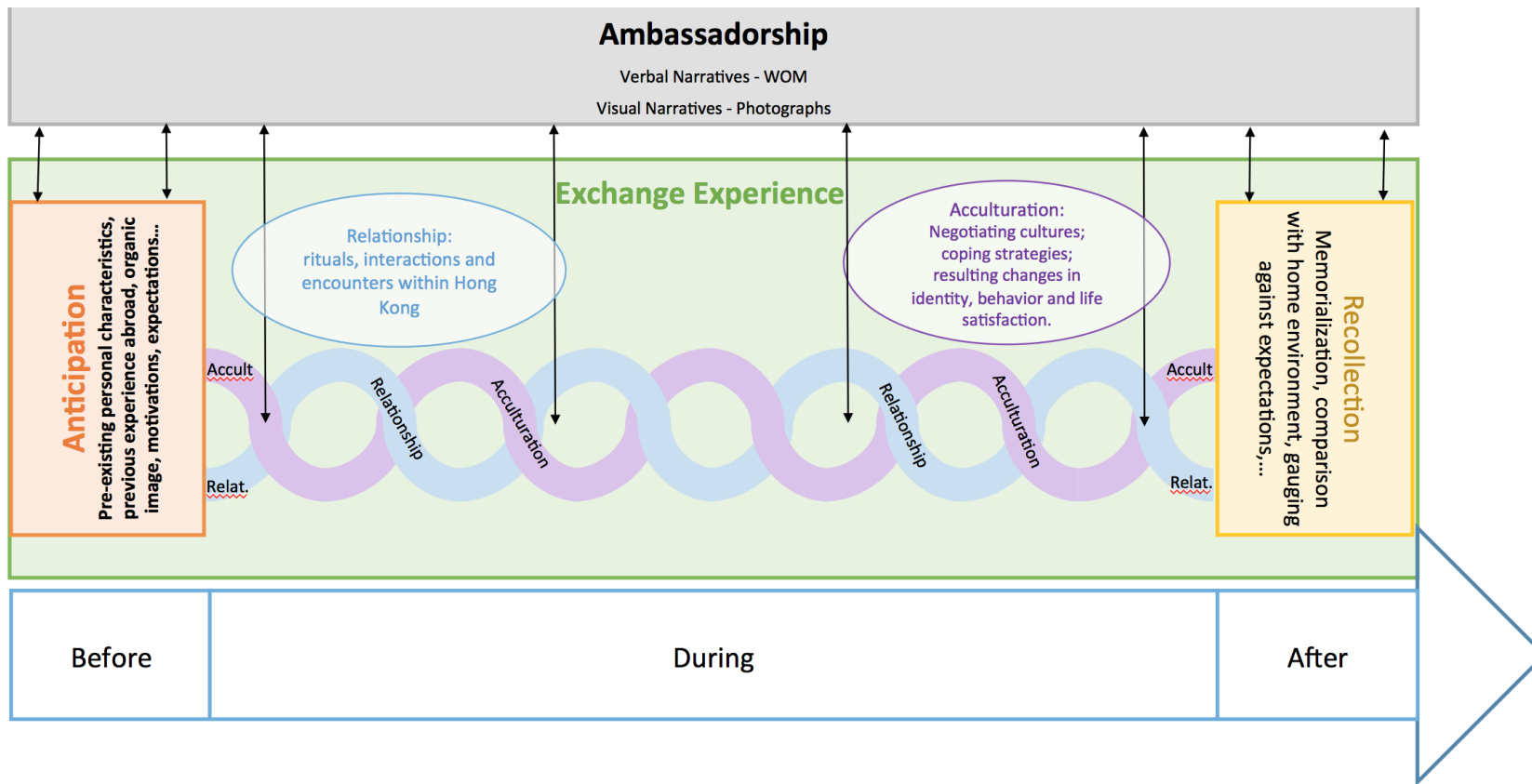
Figure 2 - The conceptual framework: the student exchange as a multisensorial experience
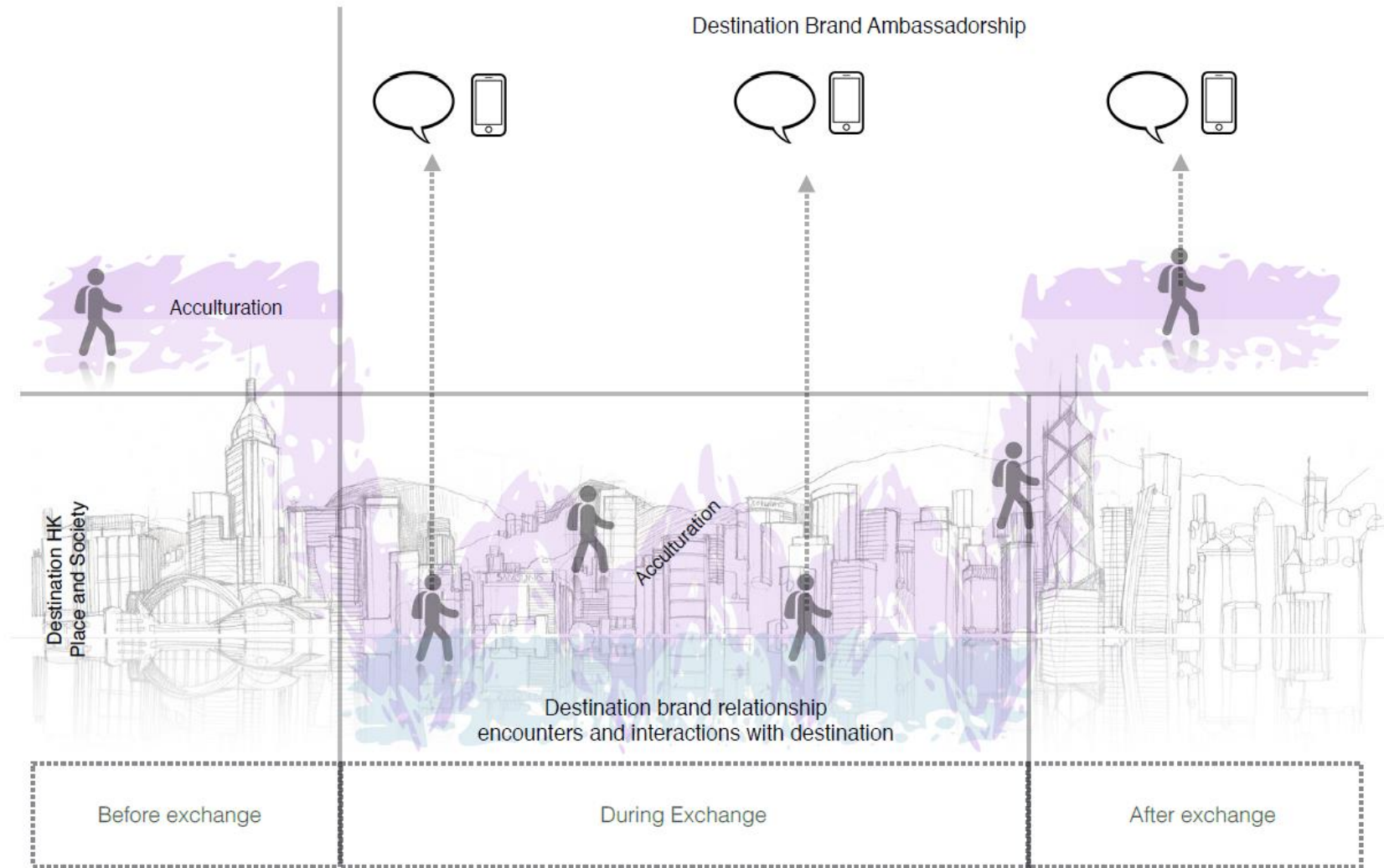
3.3   Qualitative longitudinal research

The object of the present investigation is ambassadorships for Hong Kong on the part of exchange student. As discussed above, destination ambassadorship consists of discretionary actions of advancing and exposing communications to the external environment about the destination. The researcher has also explained the focus of this study on ambassadorship in the form of exchange student narratives, first-person stories and other communications about their destination experience, either through WOM (in personal communication or through social media), or through photographs (shared on social media). Guthrie and Anderson (2010) suggest that analysing tourist story-telling during their stay at the destination rather than after allows to simultaneously capture the process of elaborating and transmitting the experience. The current study adopts the same approach with regard to the investigation of ambassadorship. Exchange students report to the researcher regarding their ambassadorial behaviours while in the study destination, and the content of their ambassadorship emerges through the respondents' first person narratives.

The formation of a brand ambassadorship is a process that manifests itself over time. By definition, a process is a phenomenon that unfolds temporally. On this basis it is best to conduct multiple data collection episodes to realize the investigation. The present study is an instance of Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) (Ritchie et al., 2014). QLR has several advantages: firstly it allows the researcher to engage with the participant over time by involving the same respondents in repeated interviews. The participants provide accounts of social processes that are both enduring and dynamic. Finally, processes are evoked afresh in the light of new knowledge or events at each encounter with the researcher (Emmel & Hughes, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2014).

By focusing on how the experience is elaborated, the researcher addresses reality as a construction. She is able to consider contextual influences by doing so while the experience is occurring. QLR can uncover how these aspects develop over time by explaining how biographical accounts interconnect with dynamic, and contingent circumstances (Emmel & Hughes, 2012). The present study moves beyond the academic habit of employing retrospective qualitative interviews to represent the destination experience. To investigate the everyday life within these experiences, the researcher has choosen to do justice to their *onflow*. Longitudinal and regular data collection is considered to be better suited to chronicle events as they unfold. In addition, this approach encourages the research methods to remain fluid and ready to emerging objects and flows that may demand closer attention (Hill et al., 2014).

Following Maxwell (2013), the present researcher addresses data collection from the points of view of selection and relationship with the respondents and then sets out to define the most suitable data analysis method based on the research question.

3.4   Research design

3.4.1   Selection of informants

3.4.1.1 Population

The purpose of qualitative research is to gain a detailed understanding of a phenomenon, of its socially constructed meanings and of its context (Hennink et al., 2011). The researcher has adopted a purposive sampling approach (Maxwell, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2014), and recruits participants who have the specific characteristics and particular features needed to explore the intended themes and answer the research questions. The point is to undertake the deliberate selection of units that reflect particular features of the sampled population, by virtue of which they are above and

uniquely informative for the research (Hennink et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2014). It is not only about selecting people, but also settings and activities suitable to provide information that is relevant to the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Hence, the researcher strives to achieve "symbolic representation" by choosing units of research based on their ability to typify a circumstance or hold the characteristics that are salient to the research matter (Ritchie et al., 2014).

This raises the need to define the characteristics that are applicable to the subject matter. The process under investigation involves experiencing Hong Kong as a destination for a sufficiently long term that will allow the observation of a process. The study focuses on verbal and visual narratives of the Hong Kong tourist experience and how this changes over time. The choice had to fall on a part of Hong Kong's transient population that resides in the city for long enough to be in a position to respond over time and whose members reside in the destination over the same period. In addition, studying a tourism population that spends more time in Hong Kong is aligned with the expressed intentions of the government of Hong Kong to diversify the tourist markets and extend average stay.

Tourists to Hong Kong stay an average of 4.1 nights (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2015b). Such duration is insufficient for data collection about the process of becoming an ambassador without requiring a very intrusive method. After considering other populations residing longer-term in Hong Kong, international students were identified as a group of sojourners that were not categorised as working foreigners. The main limitation of the latter group is that they enter and exit the city at different moments and reside for differing durations. A subgroup of international students, exchange students across Hong Kong Universities not only arrive collectively in the destination simultaneously, but also reside for a relatively uniform period, mostly for

a complete semester. The duration of stay by exchange students in the destination is sufficient to qualify them as sojourners as well as tourists based on the previously proposed definitions.

In investigating the process of transformation into brand ambassadors, this research follows ambassadorial behaviours as closely as possible. These may be manifest both face-to-face and online. Exchange students are not only prone to undertaking travel activities during their stay ,but also to staying connected via social media because of their youth (UNWTO, 2016). The profile of media users and of travellers that are most likely to share photographs online has much in common with the profile of exchange students. Young, well-educated and more affluent travellers display a higher propensity to embrace photo-sharing media. Users of photo-sharing media tend to be more enthusiastic tourists seeking to engage with the destination at a deeper level (Rodriguez Gonzalez et al., 2011). Hence, the photographs of exchange students may afford a material and visual representation of the destination experience, because prospective respondents can potentially contribute to a "virtual postcard" database that can be disseminated almost limitlessly. These also become potent markers to others that the places being depicted are worthy of the tourist gaze (Michelson & Álvarez Valencia, 2016, p. 253).

The researchers identified exchange students as the population of interest for the study. Exchange students have been compared with other longer-term tourists (Freestone & Geldens, 2008; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Rodriguez Gonzalez et al., 2011; Rodríguez et al., 2012). Yet, most of the scholarly tourism literature has focussed mainly on other young and long-term tourist segments such as backpackers. Also in their favour as a group of respondents, exchange students are a representative subgroup of the Millennial generation. Millennials tend to distance themselves from

mass tourism and rather seek authentic tourist experiences, understood as close to those experienced by residents. For this generation the word "tourist" actually has a negative connotation (Leask, Fyall, & Barron, 2013). Millennials want to be involved, to interact with the community and to learn and appreciate the destination on a deeper level (Brondoni, 2016). Such preferences are a reflection of the ousting of mass tourism in favour of the establishment of a post-tourist, defined by the desire to escape the mainstreaming of tourist practices (Jansson, 2018).

In addition, the respondents that participated in this study are Millennials also based on their age. There is disagreement as to what exact period Millennials were born in, but most academic definitions cover the years between 1982 and 1994 (Veiga et al., 2017) while trade literature seems to locate Millennials birth years between 1980 and 2000 (Goldman Sachs, 2018). All the respondents in this study fall in that age range.

The present research aims to advance research on exchange students from a tourism perspective.

3.4.1.2   Sample hetereogeneity

According to Ritchie et al. (2014) purposive sampling has two primary aims: to ensure that all the key relevant constituencies of the subject matter are covered and that there is enough diversity within each key constituency, so that the impact of the salient characteristics can be explored. The achievement of these aims will depend on trade-offs between the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the sample. When selecting a homogeneous sample, the intention is to give a detailed picture of a specific phenomenon by considering similar cases and people. Therefore the conclusions will adequately represent the average member of the population under investigation. Conversely, when investigating a heterogeneous sample, the researcher finds themes

that cut across different cases and individuals by deliberately including members of a population that vary widely from each other. In this case, the conclusions adequately represent the entire range of variation (it is also called maximum variation sampling) (Maxwell, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2014).

In determining the suitability of the sample type to the research aims, the researcher first considered that the study focuses on Hong Kong as the space where the exchange experience and acculturation occur, and as the subject of the ambassadorial behaviours. The issue of the countries and cultures of origin is relevant for acculturation. Cultural distance can significantly influence the degree and ease of acculturation (Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007; Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009). As discussed above, this study accepts that Hong Kong receives both visitors who are culturally proximate, and visitors with greater cultural distance. It also accepts that acculturation is a process that can require different intensities of cultural negotiation and that can yield varying degrees of adjustment outcomes. Besides that, a sample selected on the basis of cultural distance from Hong Kong or on the country of origin would not reflect the reality of the exchange student population. In fact, its composition depends rather on international partnerships between higher education institutions.

One point about the respondent country of origin that merits discussion is the overrepresentation of Mainland Chinese, an aspect that has characterized tourism as well as the phenomenon of international higher education in Hong Kong. Mainland Chinese make up the vast bulk of both the tourism and non-local higher education markets for Hong Kong. Of the overall enrolments of non-local students in Hong Kong University Grants Committee (UGC) funded institutions for academic year 2014/2015, almost 77% were Mainland Chinese students (UGC, 2015). Hong Kong

received in its UGC funded institutions 5,636 exchange students in academic year 2013-2014 (UGC, 2015). In the case of the exchange students (data available for 2013/2014 only) the distribution by country of origin appears more balanced: the United States and the Mainland China represent the main source countries and each account for around 18% of the total exchange students in Hong Kong (UGC, 2015). The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) received a total of 570 exchange students during the academic year 2013-2014, of which Mainland China was the major source market (168 students) followed by the USA (58), Germany (46), the United Kingdom (45), and France (44). Though Mainland China is the main origin country of foreign students, the UGC expressed a clear stance that the partnerships with Mainland China are not considered to advance the process of higher education internationalization (University Grants Committee, 2010).

Similarly, concern about Hong Kong's over-reliance on the Mainland China market is also evident in tourism. Although Hong Kong tourism relies for 77.7% of its arrivals on the Mainland China market (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2014), the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) invested three quarters of its marketing budget to address other international markets and to sustain a diversified range of source markets (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2015a; LegCo, 2017). For these reasons Mainland Chinese respondents, though representative of the predominant group of tourism arrivals and of international student enrolments, are not considered as contributing to Hong Kong's internationalization ambitions. This means that, while Mainland Chinese students will be included in the study, the sample will not be selected to reflect Mainland Chinese as a majority. It seems preferable to aim at the highest possible diversity of respondents, so that results of the study can potentially be utilised to pursue Hong Kong's diversification of student and tourist markets.

Hence, exchange students should be selected from as many different countries as possible, in order to identify the themes that cut across different respondents throughout the processes.

The length of stay for exchange students is another pertinent issue. While exchange students can stay up to a year, a single semester exchange predominates (UGC, 2015). In addition, the duration of a semester is the only one that accommodates the timely collection and analysis of data within the time frame that is available to the researcher for her doctoral studies. Finally, if the researcher recruited exchange students from across campus, this would avoid the bias of having respondents who were studying a single discipline. In light of the above discussion, the researcher selected a sample that is heterogeneous with regard to culture of origin and discipline of study, but relatively homogeneous in terms of length of stay and host institution attended.

3.4.1.3   QLR sampling and practical considerations

A longitudinal study requires maintaining commitment over time by the informants. To do so the researcher considered issues of proximity to the students and collaboration with gatekeepers. In order to legitimize the research as occurring in an safe and institutionalized context, the researcher sought the collaboration of exchange student coordinators. To secure their help, the researcher leveraged the fellowship of the colleagues at the same institution, as it was more likely that these gatekeepers would perceive a research collaboration as something beneficial to the University as a whole. Recruiting informants through exchange student coordinators also creates a relative dependence on institutional gatekeepers (Evers & Boer, 2012). Hence respondents were approached via the institution in which the researcher is studying, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU).

The recruitment of exchange student deployed two methods: through gatekeepers and through networks (Hennink et al., 2011). The PolyU Mainland and International Student Services office (MISS) offers "one-stop student-oriented support" (MISS, 2015) to Mainland Chinese and international students at PolyU. MISS represents the University office that coordinates international students during their period of residence. MISS can therefore access the contact information of exchange students and is likely to be the most effective actor in encouraging them to participate in the study. The researcher also deemed it opportune to use an additional recruitment strategy, namely exchange student networks. The MISS has the capacity to represent both the gatekeeper and the network for exchange students (it organizes international students events and gatherings). It is also commonplace for exchange students studying on the same campus to participate in common social media groups. This medium provided another network for the recruitment of prospective participants.

In the first phase of the research, respondents were recruited solely through the help of gatekeepers who dispatched institutional emails. In the second phase, when the researcher was seeking data triangulation by recruiting exchange students to compile an online journal, the Institution was unwilling to lend its support. Hence, the researcher became reliant on a network approach and on the recruitment of prospective exchange students via social media, particularly through the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Exchange Students Facebook group.

One possible problem associated with the use of both the international affairs office and the exchange students' social media groups concerning self-selection bias. Both the international affairs office and social media groupings reach out actively to international students to promote social and intercultural activities, hence the recruits

may be those who make a conscious effort to connect with local and/or international communities on campus (Hendrickson et al., 2011).

3.4.1.4   Sample size

Sample sizes are relatively small in qualitative research compared with their quantitative counterparts. The latter require bigger samples to satisfy the requirements of incidence and prevalence, to provide estimates and to respect principles of statistical significance. Qualitative studies do not intend to identify the prevalence of certain issues in a population, or to generalize the findings. Hence issues of scale, national coverage or distributional representation enhance the robustness of the sample in quantitative research approaches (Hennink et al., 2011). In qualitative studies phenomena only need to appear once in the data collected to be considered for purposes of analysis (Ritchie et al., 2014). Given its qualitative and longitudinal nature, this study investigates a small number of informants, so that issues "can be explored in depth" (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 84).

The information obtained through qualitative research is rich and even a small sample size can provide large scale data for analysis. Each data collection episode requires considerable time and resources; therefore, the sample size should do justice to the available time and means (J. Ritchie et al., 2014). As a rule of thumb, qualitative studies by means of in-depth interviews involve less than 50 respondents (J. Ritchie et al., 2014). In the case of longitudinal studies, decisions regarding the sample size require additional considerations such as available time-span, budget, risk of attrition (respondents' drop out) and volume of collected data to be analysed.

Firstly, there will be a considerable amount of data to analyse compared with non-longitudinal or cross sectional research because each individual case consists of data collection episodes repeated at different times. A second challenge related to the

longitudinal nature of the study is the risk of participants' dropout (or attrition) during the data collection period, due to the fact that their engagement has to be stretched and maintained over time (Patrick, 2012). The author expects that, in the case of exchange students, there are high chances of inconsistency and unexpected circumstances occurring.

Based on all of the considerations noted above, a realistically manageable sample was estimated at around 12 respondents, which would have resulted in 72 in-depth interviews. In practice, one student dropped out after the second interview, which resulted in the exclusion of its responses from the study. The final sample includes 11 exchange students who were enrolled at PolyU during the spring of 2015-2016 academic year. The informants were from: Mainland China (four), South Korea, the USA and Finland (two each) and the Netherlands (one).

3.4.2   Visual data: photographs and unsolicited ambassadorship

As sharing on social media is not prompted by the researcher, tourist-generated photography may be considered a form of spontaneous and (more or less) continuous destination- and self-narrative. This is consistent with the general purpose of the study to understand how the exchange students develop as destination brand ambassadors. Through the use of visual data the researcher aims at enhancing the robustness of the study. Visuals and in particular photographs are the communication means of this century. On top of that, visual research methods, while on the rise, are still underrepresented in academic research. Academic tourism research has traditionally favoured the written word over other data typologies such as the visual (Feighey, 2003; Xiao et al., 2013). Yet, visual data present certain advantages over the written word, such as the fact that they convey meanings that cannot be readily expressed through text (Rydzik, Pritchard, Morgan, & Sedgley, 2013) and their ability to inform

on "[the] multiplicity of meanings, messages and motivations inherent in the phenomenon" (Burns & Lester, 2003, p. 81; Pink, 2013).

Alongside the gaining ground of visual research methods, there has been an increased focus on investigating embodied emotions, performances and affects that are integral to being a tourist (Xiao et al., 2013). The tourist gaze 3.0 is probably the most prominent instantiation of this development, as it emphasizes the embodied and 'hybrid' performances of gazing and photographing (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Photographs are seen as the combination of the longed-for/ideal and the lived experience; grasping the meaning attached to tourist photography requires surpassing traditional readings and emphasizing photographs as more than mere still images (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012). One of the outcomes of this evolvement has been a scholarly turn in visual research towards the senses, which aligns with the growing support for non-representational approaches (Pink, 2013).

3.4.2.1.1   Representational and non-representational approaches

Two visual data analysis approaches that have been widely applied to photography are content analysis and semiotic analysis. In this section the researcher will discuss such methods and how the hereby-proposed scheme for visual data analysis is an advancement of these two methods towards a non-representational approach. Content analysis is widely applied to the examination of communication in the form of text, but it is also relevant to the examination of tourist photographs, as these are also forms of communication, that use graphics rather than words (Smith, 2017). When tourism photographs are viewed as produced *for* tourists, such as advertising and postcards, they are treated as "their own evidence – they are what they are", and referred to as "visual records" (p. 215). A content analysis carried out in this

context on a collection of photographs can summarize depicted attributes and themes into a holistic visual representation of the destination (Hsu & Song, 2014; MacKay & Couldwell, 2004; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). This is achieved by coding the manifest (empirically observable) content of the images (Smith, 2017).

In this research the view that visual narrative is a form of ambassadorship implies that the analysed photographs are not only *for* tourists, but also *by* tourists. To the network of people these photographs are shared with, they represent a visual record of the destination experience. To the tourists that take them they are a way to capture what they found interesting or to encapsulate a memory or a story (Smith, 2017). Therefore, the same photographs are also "visual diaries" Smith (2017), that is to say the tourists' representations of the world, a medium to tell about their experiences and a means for the researcher to understand the tourist gaze and some aspects of social reality. In order to gain insights on the photographs as visual diaries the researcher has to unearth the latent content, hence the meaning of the manifest content. This is why content analysis is normally followed by an interpretive analysis (Rakic, 2012).

Interpretive analysis often involves examining photographs as meta-narratives of tourism experiences and interpreting them for what they symbolize, denote and connote (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012; Jensen, 2016). Accordingly, tourist photographs have often been characterised as a dichotomy between metonym and metaphor, and their attributes as denotation or synecdoche (Hunter, 2012, 2013, 2016; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Methodologies concerned with identifying structures of symbolic meaning and sociocultural significance are a notable examples of representational approaches to tourism research (Smith, 2016; Xiao et al., 2013).

Interpretive methods used in tourism research on visual data are diverse. Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013) used content analysis to undertake a comparative investigation of the co-occurrence of destination attributes in DMO and tourist-generated photographs. Hao, Wu, Morrison, and Wang (2016) utilized codes resulting from content analysis to identify the factors expressing local cultures in photographs of a tourist performance. Some researchers have built upon content analysis to analyse photographs semiotically to answer questions about social meanings (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012; Hunter, 2012, 2013, 2016). Asking the why and *what* behind photographs can be achieved through semiotic analysis, a method of interest in the current study because of its emphasis on construction and transmission of social meanings. Semiotics can explain how certain processes of meaning are funnelled into features of photographs. It is therefore here discussed and utilised with a view to construct a suitable reading of exchange students' visual ambassadorship.

Social semiotics concerns how sign-makers express meanings and felt subjectivities (*signifieds*) in given cultural contexts by choosing the most apt and plausible forms (*signifiers*) of semiotic mode. In the context of visual communication, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) proposed a "visual grammar", hence an account of how in images signified and signifiers are combined in structures and frameworks to realize meaning according to cultural conventions. The term "grammar" it is not be understood as fixed and constrained regularity. Rather, it refers to the use of "semiotic resources", and it is valid also in the context of contemporary forms of communication that are mobile, provisional and unstable (Kress, 2010). Semiotic resources are used for representation, socially determined and, while carrying certain discernible regularities of social occasions, they can also be remade in each communicative context (Kress, 2010).

By focusing on semiotic resources, the visual grammar is a framework that can be applied to cases in which conventions, values and beliefs of the specific social and cultural context of production of an image are uncertain. In such cases, the messages that an image conveys depend on conventions that guide viewers in their interpretation (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Reality is "in the eye of the beholder", in the viewers' prior narrative beliefs, collective memories and value commitments rather than in the photographs' hidden signifying chains with automatic ideological impacts (Emmison et al., 2012; Haldrup & Larsen, 2012). When they are considered singularly, photographs do not have an absolute or unique reading: they are polysemic. Each possible reading is partial and mediated by specific ways of seeing. This includes readings on the part of the researcher, who does not merely discover the meaning of a visual, but rather participates into its construction (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012; McGregor, 2000). Hence photographs are messages consisting of a combination of semiotic resources assembled according to the sign-maker's preferred structures of meaning and interpreted according to the receiver's preferred framework of interpretation.

The multiplicity of potential readings is more palpable on the Internet, with online photographs instantiating the disjunction between the context of production and reception of a message. Once online, the afterlife of a digital photograph is uncertain with a loss of control on the part of the photographer. Viewers encounter the same image in multiple localities, contexts and ways and have no face-to-face contact with the photographer (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012; Pink, 2013). Online photographs are then semiotic potentials, made of formal components, compositional structures, and communicative resources (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Media empires have had the effect of normalizing visual communication resources, thereby homogenising

semiotic resources of visual communication globally (Kress, 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). To summarize, the concept of semiotic resources implies that the agency of the photographs may differ from and exceed the attributed meanings of the producers and viewers (Rakic, 2012; Rose, 2012). The current study starts from addressing such agency and by doing so it bridges the representational and non-representational approaches to visual data analysis.

At first, the collected photographs are viewed as representative of Hong Kong's imagery, and hence as the "topography" of its landscape (Wolcott, 1995). In fact, the collection of photographs provides an amalgam of the features of destination landscapes as perceived by those who experience them (Hunter, 2012). Starting from the collected Hong Kong's imagery, the present study follows a non-representational approach by emphasizing the embodied and the experiential in the visuals (Rose, 2012). To do so, the researcher focuses on the practices and performances of making photographs and their material qualities (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012). The purpose is to experience the "subjective feel" of the photograph that is "ineliminable in our seeing something" (Rose, 2012, p. 29), because a photograph is a visual that captures a feeling (Scarles, 2009). To experience such "feel", the researcher investigates the photographs' "compositionality", the most relevant aspect to its visual effect (Rose, 2012). Devoting close attention to photographic form and composition extends beyond the representational towards "a trace of an originary event" (Marks, 2002). This approach is novel because visual methodologies usually adopt an underpinning theoretical logic for purposes of interpretation (Rose, 2012). In contrast, the photographs that are used in this study are stand-alone and bare of the various cultural and social explanations that researchers commonly connect to their material qualities (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012). Therefore, in this phase the semiotic resources in the

photographs are investigated at face value through compositionality. Compositionality, then, provides the researcher with a system to scrutinise a photograph's content and to become familiar with its materiality and formation.

In particular, this study focuses on the implicit power of photographs as narrative tools of the tourist experience and on their transformation over time. Such photographic narrative is one form of destination ambassadorship. Its transformation over time reflects the process of becoming an ambassador.

3.4.2.1.2 Collection of visual data

When visuals are used as a data source, three approaches towards collection and analysis may be considered: visuals can be collected from secondary sources and analysed later; visuals could be created for the specific purpose of the research by either the researcher or the respondents; visuals could be used in the context of interviews or observations as a tools of elicitation (Rakic & Chambers, 2012). The current study encompasses the first and third approaches. The researcher chose not to request respondents to produce photographs ad hoc for the study because of the risk to influence the exchange students' photo–taking and –sharing. By giving directions on how to produce photographs the researcher could have influenced how exchange students experience the place. This would have constituted a sort of "choreography of the tourist gaze" (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Instead, the researcher relied on tourist-generated photography and asked for access to the social media profiles where informants uploaded their pictures of the stay at the destination. This way, they created their own images before they had to explain them in the presence of the researcher. Informants independently chose the subjects that they considered worthy of photographing and sharing, and they composed and framed images in order to

convey their own subjective interpretations of the experience (Scarles, 2012). This gives them "photo-voice" (term by Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007) and the chance to construct accounts of their own experiences (Scarles, 2012).

The researcher collected visuals shared on those social media where the students reported themselves as being most active. Besides photo-heavy social media, notably Instagram, respondents also used Facebook and WeChat. The researcher collected photographs on the same occasion in which in-depth interviews have been carried out. Photographs were collected on the third, fourth and fifth interview (all three interviews occurring during the exchange students' stay). Informants were encouraged to pick photographs that they had taken during their Hong Kong stay. The researcher stressed to the informants that every picture was relevant to the study as far as it was a picture spontaneously shared on their social media up to that moment and prioritized as "to be" shared with their network. They were asked to prioritize four to five photographs in order to restrict the available volume of visual data from the informants' social media accounts (followed by the researcher) to a manageable photographic sample.

No reference was made as to what kind of photographs they should share. The self-selection ensured that the analysed images were actually relevant to the understanding of how communication about Hong Kong changes, in that they are laden with the willingness to let others see them. These photographs may be deemed as most likely to be viewed by others and as most representative of the online image on social media (Hunter, 2016; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). For most informants, the selected photos had already been uploaded on social media. For those inactive on social media, the researcher requested photos that they had sent to family and friends or that they deemed as essential for viewing by their families and/or

friends. The researchers anticipated collecting a total of about 165 photographs. In reality, some submitted less, and others submitted more. The assembled photographs ultimately amounted to 209 items.

3.4.2.1.3   Visual data analysis: a schematic approach

As mentioned previously, researchers have often adopted representational approaches in seeking the cultural meanings behind the production of visuals or as a basis for their interpretation (Hunter, 2012, 2016; MacKay & Couldwell, 2004; Michaelidou, Siamagka, Moraes, & Micevski, 2013; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). This study bridges the representational and non-representational approaches. The researcher introduced a visual analysis schematic device that is a synthesis of two visual research techniques: Rose (2012) compositional interpretation, and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) visual grammar.

According to Rose (2012), a "clearly established methodological framework" (p. 298) does not yet exist for the use of photographs in social science research. In this study the researcher makes particular reference to two methods of visual analysis, one being visuals content analysis/compositional and the analysis of data obtained through photo-elicitation. Rose (2012) advises an initial content analysis. Even though it is usually recommended for identifying frequencies and patterns in big data sets, and it tends to result in quantitative information, it can be useful for the longitudinal description of a process, by complementing the verbal narrative.

Photo elicitation allowed participants to discuss issues that would not be otherwise raised in the interviews by prompting the respondent to talk in different registers too, as photographs might evoke memories and emotional and affective reactions; it might be useful in finding out taking-for-granted information, feelings or

thoughts that otherwise would remain implicit, in this sense acting as a complement to the verbal solicitation of the interviews; finally, as already mentioned, they allow for participants empowerment and further collaboration between respondents and researchers (Rose, 2012). The interview phase was very important because in this phase the respondents performed their social identity. Photographs were a form of impression management as "visual objects put to work to perform social identities and relations" (Rose, 2012, p. 313).

As for the analysis of the photographs, this study draws great inspiration from Rose (2012). This found easy application to tourism (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012; Hao et al., 2016) because it draws from geography and visual culture. Her approach is based on the idea that methodical analysis of pictorial materials ensures their representativeness and ready interpretability. The redundancies in content and composition across photographic data point to conventions that are used to convey meanings (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Therefore researches concerning questions of meaning and representation should rely at least initially on detailed scrutiny of the visual representations of destination image. Unfortunately this stage is often neglected and is subordinated to theoretical debates about interpretation (Hunter, 2012; Rose, 2012).

Rose (2012) proposed "compositional interpretation" as a tool to describe how a photograph looks and its appearance through a detailed vocabulary. By identifying the photographic features of represented destinations, the researcher accounts for the denotative pictorial elements of destination images. These provide a structure to subsequently identify the implicit messages, to discuss their meanings (Hunter, 2012), and to distinguish the connotative from the denotative (Barthes, 1973).

The second visual research technique acknowledges the communicative potential of photographs. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) produced a "grammar of visual design". This is a dictionary of compositional vocabulary. It explains the visual structure of the photographs, the way in which photographic components are combined and points to signs of experience and forms of social interaction. Its origins in the field of semiotics suggest that grammar can enhance understandings of meaning making. The photograph is here understood as one of the available modes through which the communicator's meaning is made material. The meaning making resources of the photograph are combined to materially realize a message, hence semiotic resources act as prompts for interpretation on the viewer's part (Kress, 2010).

The two above-mentioned methods provide the recipients of visual narratives with schemes that assist interpretation. They are of particular merit for the current research in striving to isolate visual narratives as they are presented to viewers, at face value. The present study examines the semiotic resources of Hong Kong tourist photographs. In emphasizing the photographs' semiotic resources, the researchers refrain from explaining culturally specific meanings. In discussing how such resources are combined through visual statements, the study uses compositional vocabulary to describe the visual grammar of the photographs.

3.4.2.1.4 Visual data analysis procedure

The visual scheme proposes a guideline to analyse the visual impact of photographs. The researchers integrated pictorial structures in the model that constitute communicative resources and have potential for connotation and meaning, as discussed in Rose (2012) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). Composition refers

to the combination of these photographic components, which are rarely distinct. The combination will convey the photograph's visual impact.

The proposed schematic device contains:

1. *Content.* The approach to content analysis is twofold.

2. The first content analysis concerns what is shown in each single photograph (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012; Rose, 2012). This requires consideration of the photograph as a metonym, taking destination attributes in photographs at "face-value" and as "stand-alone" (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013, p. 592). To cover all depicted destination image attributes the researchers identified content categories encompassing both subjects (humans portrayed) and objects (physical and material elements) (Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Hsu & Song, 2014). In order to code individual photographs' content the researcher had to determine which elements of the photographs were the most salient. Salience is achieved through complex interactions and trade-offs between size, sharpness of focus, tonal and colour contrasts, placement, and perspective. Context plays a similar role. A photograph may present elements that connect with a particular location and a moment in time (full contextualization) or in a void, against a plain unmodulated background (low contextualization) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). By evaluating these strategies the researcher recorded the content illustrated in each single photograph.

3. The second phase of content analysis covers the whole collection of respondent photographs. The aim during this phase is to identify the themes that dominate Hong Kong visual narratives. Such content analysis suits the holistic capturing of destination images (Li & Stepchenkova, 2011). The

photographs are sampled, coded, and placed into themes (Rose, 2012; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). In contrast to previous investigations where the categorizations were guided by theory (Hao et al., 2016; Hsu & Song, 2014; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013) the current study adopts and inductive approach.

For Rose (2012) photographic content forms a part of compositional analysis. To present the results more clearly, the researchers opted to start with the identification of categories, followed by consideration of compositional aspects and any associated changes. The presentation of results begins with an aggregated content analysis.

4. *Colour.* Colour combinations imbue photographs with more or less harmony; stress certain depicted elements or even suggest distance (Rose, 2012). From a semiotics perspective, they can suggest whether the photograph will be perceived as realistic on the basis of similarities with photographic naturalism (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). For the latter reason it is often sufficient to consider whether the photograph relies on contrasts or on the blending of similar value and saturation hues (Rose, 2012). The following four elements of colour should be considered:

5. *Hue differentiation.* This refers to the discernibility of a colour as its hue form (Rose, 2012) and can be measured on a continuum from a maximally diversified range of colours to monochrome (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006);

6. *Modulation* refers to the shading of a single colour and is measured on a continuum extending from the use of many different shades of the colour to a plain and flat area of the same colour (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

7. *Saturation* refers to the purity of a colour compared to its hue. It can vary on a continuum ranging from full saturation, which presents colours in their most

vivid form, to low saturation, which presents the colour as neutral or absent (black and white) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Rose, 2012).

8. *Value* refers to the lightness or darkness of the colour. If a colour has high value, it is closer to its white form (Rose, 2012). This element of was identified by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) as an important marker of a photographs' factuality.

9. *Spatial organization.* According to Rose (2012) spatial organization communicative resources are representative of the relations among elements within the photograph and of the relations between the photograph and its viewer. With regard to the latter, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) identify types of contact established between depicted subjects and the viewers; social distance between viewer and depicted subjects; and attitudes the viewer is invited to have towards the photograph's subject. Spatial organization is discussed on the basis of the following elements:

10. *Volumes arrangement.* The aesthetics of how volumes in a photograph are arranged and of the lines connecting them informs harmony and affective impact, and the framing of its various elements (Rose, 2012). Volumes can be connected and presented as belonging together with others (low framing), or isolated units of information which individuality and differentiation are stressed (high framing) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Volumes arrangement also attributes a certain information value to depicted elements according to the zone they occupy (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Based on culturally specific directionalities of reading, viewers could accord different meanings to a photograph's element from its position in relation to margin or centre, top or bottom and left or right.

11. *Logic of figuration* refers to geometrical perspectives that determine perceived width, depth, and distance and accord a particular viewing position to the viewers (Rose, 2012). This elements provides important evidence of how visual images exert their own effect (Holly, 1996). Elements of spatial organization that determine the position of the viewer are:

12. *Horizontal angle*. The angle between the frontal plane of the viewer and of the portrayed subjects may be parallel in the case of a frontal angle, or divergent, in the case of an oblique angle (Rose, 2012). Such communicative resources are susceptible to suggesting either involvement or detachment between the viewer and the depicted subject (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

13. *Vertical angle* inspires relations of power between the viewer and the depicted subjects. In Western cultures, for example, when the viewers are positioned to look down on the scene, it is suggested that they have some power over it; if they are positioned to look up to it, then inferiority is present and positioning at the same level suggests an equal relationship (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Rose, 2012).

14. *Shot Distance.* Distinguished between close-up, medium shot and long shot, shot distance replicates the proxemics of face-to-face interactions and the attitudes of social relations. It can therefore elicit perceptions of physical, emotional or even social closeness and near-ness to the depicted subjects (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Rose, 2012).

15. *Gazes*. The organization of looks and gazes within, from and towards the photograph determines whether a photograph is a demand or an offer. A connection is initially established, as the depicted subject explicitly acknowledges and addresses the viewer through gazes or gestures, for

example by looking directly into the viewer's eyes. Contrarily, a photograph is an offer if the represented subjects are presented for the viewer's scrutiny as an object of contemplation, and no direct contact is established (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Finally, identification is achieved if the viewer can look at things the same way as the depicted subjects (Rose, 2012).

16. *Light* influences perceptions of colour and of spatial organization. Different types of light can set atmospheres or moods to photographs (daylight, electric light, candlelight …). Similarly, the specific sources of light may highlight particular elements or emphasise the play of light and shades (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Rose, 2012). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) identified illumination as another marker of a photographs' factuality.

17. *Expressive content* regards the mood, atmosphere and feel of a photograph. It is particularly relevant for non-representational scholars who are interested in embodied and sensory experiencing of photographs; the researcher's sensory engagement with an image is conveyed through compositional analysis (Rose, 2012). It is challenging for the researcher because it concerns the photograph's affective characteristics, yet is relevant to investigating a destination image. The expressive content of a destination's visual narrative summarizes the destination image as it is received by the viewer. In this context though, the viewer may be considered as the researcher.

Table 2 - Visual Analysis Criteria

Component	Pictorial attribute	Definition	Material aspect	Descriptive outcome
Content	Individual image site	Concerns what is shown in the single photograph		
			Subject/object	What is depicted?
			Salience	Hierarchy of importance.
			Contextualization	Connection with location and time
	Aggregate level	Identifying the themes that dominate visual narratives		
			Themes and categories	Dominant attributes of experience depicted

Component	Pictorial attribute	Definition	Material aspect	Descriptive outcome
Colour	Hue Differentiation	Discernibility of a colour.	Diversified range or monochrome	Combinations can suggest: harmony, distance, factuality.
	Modulation	Shading of a single colour.	Shaded or flat colour areas	
	Saturation	Purity of a colour compared to its hue.	Vivid/full colour or neutral/absence of colour	
	Value	Lightness or darkness of the colour.	Light or dark	

Component	Pictorial attribute	Definition	Material aspect		Descriptive outcome
Spatial Organization (1)	Volumes arrangement	Aesthetics of how volumes in a photograph are arranged and of the lines connecting them. Informs harmony and affective impact. Attributes a certain information value to depicted elements according to the zone they occupy	Framing		Generally: harmony and affective impact.
				Connected (low) or isolated (high)	Belonging together or individuality and differentiation.
			Information value		
				Margin or centre	Information's value attributed according to directionality of reading.
				Left or right	
				Top or bottom	

Component	Pictorial attribute	Definition	Material aspect		Descriptive outcome
Spatial Organization (2)	Logic of figuration	Geometrical perspectives that determine perceived width, depth, and distance and accord a particular viewing position to the viewers	Horizontal angle	Frontal or oblique suggesting either involvement or detachment between the viewer and the depicted subject	
					Involvement or detachment
			Vertical angle	Over – equal – under. Inspires relations of power between the viewer and the depicted subjects.	
					Power – equality – inferiority
			Shot distance	Close-up – medium shot – long shot. Elicits perceptions of physical, emotional or even social closeness and near-ness to the depicted subjects	
					Social intimacy to social distance

Component	Pictorial attribute	Definition	Material aspect		Descriptive outcome
Spatial organization (3)	Gazes	The organization of looks and gazes within, from and towards the photograph determines whether a photograph is a demand or an offer.	Demand		
				Viewer is acknowledged or directly addressed.	Establishes a direct connection between viewer and subject/object.
			Offer		
				Viewer is not acknowledged or addressed.	No direct connection between viewer and subject/object. The latter is for contemplation, in display.
			Identification		
				Point of view of depicted subject is shared with viewer.	Strong identification and "as if" effect on the viewer.
Spatial organization (4)	Lights	Perceptions of colour and of spatial organization. Specific sources of light may highlight particular elements or emphasise the play of light and shades			Generally: Atmosphere and mood, factuality
			Type		Highlight and play of light and shades
			Source		

Expressive content		Feel of and sensory engagement with the photograph		Summary of the destination's visual narrative as received and described by the viewer.

Source: Adapted from Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) and Rose (2012)

The photographs for each informant were analysed according to the chronological order of the three data collection episodes and based on the proposed visual scheme. Comments on each element of the scheme were documented for the individual photographs (content, colour, spatial organization and expressive content). This generated in excess of 36,000 words of notes that were subsequently displayed in summary tables, one per informant (see figure 1). In terms of content each code represents a feature or attribute of the destination as represented in the photograph (Hao et al., 2016; Hunter, 2016; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Most photographs contained more than one code.

Table 3 - Template for the display of notes resulting from the familiarization with the visual data of a single informant.

Informant 1															
	EPISODE 1					EPISODE 2					EPISODE 3				
	ic 1	ic 2	ic 3	ic 4	ic 5	ic 1	ic 2	ic 3	ic 4	ic 5	ic 1	ic 2	ic 3	ic 4	ic 5
Content															
Colour															
Spatial Organization															
Expressive Content															

Notes relative to colour, spatial organization and expressive content were also documented. For the purpose of presenting the results in the section below, the "content" notes for each photograph were selected and then compared per informant across data collection episodes (See Table 3), before aggregated content analysis across informants (See table 4). These subsequent steps of aggregating information generated a thematic framework of content, resulting in these main categories: Hong Kong cityscapes; objects; buildings and installations; natural landscapes; details of urban space; people; and other destinations.

Table 4 - Content analysis across data collection episodes for a single informant

Informant 1															
	EPISODE 1					EPISODE 2					EPISODE 3				
	ic 1	ic 2	ic 3	ic 4	ic 5	ic 1	ic 2	ic 3	ic 4	ic 5	ic 1	ic 2	ic 3	ic 4	ic 5
Content															
Colour															
Spatial Organization															
Expressive Content															

Table 5 - FiTemplate for the display of content analysis notes per data episode and across informants

CONTENT			
	EPISODE 1	EPISODE 2	EPISODE 3
Informant 1			
Informant 2			
Informant 3			
:			
Informant 11			

As proposed by Ritchie et al. (2014) the thematic framework was applied to the data in order to index and sort the photographs. The photographs were indexed by writing the category name on the back of the printed photo manually. The printed out photographs were arranged in lines according to the category and columns that correspond to the data collection episode. This pinpointed compositional forms that were not found when analysing photographs one by one at a computer screen and that emerged by virtue of being eye-catching when viewed in aggregate. Consequentl,y the results of this study are presented as

changes in compositional and material aspects by thematic category. The result is a discourse of the exchange students' visual narrative about Hong Kong.

3.4.3   Verbal data: collecting narratives through in-depth interviewing

The present study relies on two types of data: verbal data in the form of in-depth interviews and diaries; and visual data in the form of respondents' photographs. Investigating destination ambassadorship in its verbal form presents one main limitation, namely the impossibility to capture the phenomenon as it occurs. In fact the researcher cannot plan to be present and collect data as spontaneous verbal communication about Hong Kong is advanced. Spontaneous interactions do not lend themselves easily to recording, as it is hard to predict the actual time and settings where they occur. Therefore often researchers cannot access the real unmediated experiences, but only knowledge about real events and experiences through individuals' storytelling and narratives. In these cases, investigators "don't have access to the 'real thing', only the speaker's (or writer's or artist's) imitation (*mimesis*)" (Riessman, 2008, p. 22). In-depth interviews constitute prime settings for constructing accounts and capturing as much as possible of verbatim interactions. They are suitable approximation because they are not simply information transfers, but also actively and collaboratively constructed conversations.

Therefore, the researcher must take note of her participation because the interaction with participants is a relevant part of the data (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). As a consequence, the narrative analysis proposed by Riessman (2008) for this study because of its constructivist slant, was carried out on accounts of the situated practices of storytelling. The researcher analysed not only the internal organization of narratives, but also the conditions and details of narrative occasions, how these mediated the organisation and meaning of the

narratives and how participants' narratives operated within their society of reference (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

This research makes use of narrative as data source as well as method of presenting the findings. First, the narrative data are constructed and told by the research participants around the phenomena under investigation (Riessman, 2008). Through the sense making of the experience participants construct the destination image. Their first-person narratives are an approximation of what they will be likely telling to friends and family about Hong Kong (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010). Second, throughout the research process, the researcher too produced narratives. Based on interviews and visual data, the researcher developed interpretive accounts of the findings organized narratively. Hence, the study will culminate in a narrative of the research. A narrative is here understood as an account presented in a meaningful pattern rather than in random and disconnected snippets; providing a sequenced storyline, characters and the particulars of a setting (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, the narrative of research here proposed is built over the course of several interviews (Riessman, 2008).The researcher selected in-depth interviews as a data collection method because they allow eliciting participants' narratives on how they had experienced the destination, and therefore the verbal communication they advance about Hong Kong (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

In-depth interviews were suited for the present study because of their ability to trace processes and unearth key events (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In fact, when carried out correctly, in-depth interviews are like conversations with a purpose, whereby the interviewees are the ones sharing their story (Hennink et al., 2011). Evers and Boer (2012) define qualitative interviewing as "a form of information gathering […] [whereby] the interviewer creates space for participants to dwell – in their own words – on the perceived facts, their

experiences, the meaning they give to the subject of investigation, nuances regarding it and its possible effects on their lives" (p. 35).

By choosing qualitative interviews as a data collection method the author aimed at achieving five goals as explained by Rubin and Rubin (2012). First of all, through qualitative interview the researcher aimed at the detail of information, trying to cover the fine points and the particulars of the chosen topic. Secondly, the researcher strived for depth of information. Interviews that achieve a good degree of depth allow to understand "history, context, and contending points of view" around the researched phenomenon (p. 103). Detail concerns the ability of interviews to uncover the what and how, while depth explains the why. Therefore detail is what adds "solidity, clarity, evidence and example" while depth "adds layers of meaning, different angles on the subject, and understanding" (p. 104). Another characteristic of data collected through qualitative interview is nuance, the quality by which the discussed reality is not just black and white, it has different shades of meaning and it is true to different extents at different times. The author particularly succeeded in reaching the fourth main advantage of in-depth interviewing: vividness of data, by virtue of which the events respondents refer to are made easy to imagine and evocative. This is attained by formulating questions in a way that allows room for respondents to tell the stories and to share the examples they wanted to. Finally, qualitative interviews represent a suitable data collection method to achieve data richness, hence data that cover the width of the whole subject and let numerous themes emerge.

In designing the interviews, the researcher also negotiated the proper trade-off between cultural and topical interviews. This choice is relevant because the two types are suited to unearth different types of information. Topical interviews concern topics that are defined and placed in a specific time frame, such as a particular event, while cultural interviews concern topics of the everyday life, that are not explicit and for which it is hard to pose questions on

the specific matter (Evers & Boer, 2012). In particular in topical interviewing the questions look for specific facts and description of events to answer a focused research question, while cultural interviewing invite respondents to express themselves regarding norms and values (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In practice, interviews can have elements of both types. With regard to the present study, matters of acculturation and relationship with the destination are hard for the respondents to articulate in a direct manner and are strongly affected by the norms and values they hold. Therefore these topics would better be addressed through cultural interviews. The investigation of ambassadorship behaviours have to be heard by the interviewer within the informant's narrative, which is best addressed by topical questions that ask the respondent to inform on what happened (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

3.4.3.1 The researcher-participant relationship: a responsive interviewing method

Discussions about relationships with those who are studied are based on the idea of "reflexivity" by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007). Reflexivity conveys the concept that the researcher is part of the world that he or she studies and that as such he or she cannot avoid influencing and being influenced by it. It is a principle well suited to the situation of the constructivist inquirer, who is both a participant and a facilitator, and to a constructivist ontology, which views realities as created through interaction between researchers and informants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). According to Maxwell (2013) the negotiation with informants goes beyond the issue of gaining access to the information that they can provide and actually demands an on-going renegotiation of the relationship.

Renegotiation requires a certain flexibility of the research design, which is continuously adapted through iterative processes as it unfolds (Maxwell, 2013). Hence the researcher engages in a "skill learning cycle" of continuous improvement of the research design and of her own research skills (Gorden, 1992). In this study, the relationship with participants is established and negotiated during face-to-face in-depth interviews, which must therefore be

flexibly designed to change throughout the research process. The approach is referred to as interactive interviewing by Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy (1997), or responsive interviewing by Rubin and Rubin (2012). The researcher hears what is said and changes direction to catch a new piece of information or a new emerging theme. The approach also allows deriving additional questions during the interview to obtain more detail and depth and refocusing the broader questions as needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This type of interviewing is more than a mere exchange of questions and answers. It allows narratives to emerge when the researcher gives up control in favour of the interviewees and follows them down their trails (Riessman, 2008).

Besides the approach to interviewing, the relationship established between researcher and participant is also defined by the attitude used to access information. Even though responsive interviewing resembles ordinary conversations, the latter are usually about maintaining some sort of social relationship, while during interviews a relationship is established with the specific purpose to elicit answers to a research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Total access is rarely achieved nor is necessarily a prerequisite to the study's success. The point is to gain information relevant to the research question in an ethical manner (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher can gain access to information by undertaking a confrontational approach or an empathetic one (Evers & Boer, 2012). Given the likely unfamiliarity of respondents with interview processes and given that the objective is for the respondents to share personal experiences, the researcher chose here an empathetic attitude towards the informants. Responsive interviewing was found to serve well this purpose, because of the emphasis it puts on trust and reciprocity. The same way the interviewee is required to reveal something of himself or herself, the interviewer demonstrated a certain degree of openness (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Establishing a dialogic relationship and communicative equality between researcher and informant was important to elicit narratives.

The researcher's emotional attentiveness and engagement, and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation were better suited to produce narratives than focussing on the specific wording of the questions (Riessman, 2008).

Ethical considerations were a third aspect of the relationship with participants. In particular, addressing the fact that the interviews would have always been, at least to some extent, an intrusion into the respondents' exchange experience. In these circumstances it was important to ensure rapport. Rapport is the trust that arises between the interviewer and the students and was achieved by establishing early on in the interviews an atmosphere conducive to confidence, which encouraged respondents to share important and truthful information (Evers & Boer, 2012). The researcher had to learn along the way how students' perceived and responded to her actions (Maxwell, 2013). It was her responsibility to ensure not to fall in the traps of either under rapport (the respondent has no confidence) or over rapport (the interviewer over-identifies with the respondents). Even difficulties in establishing and maintaining the relationship were found to be representative to some extent of what was to be understood, how respondents lived and how they were organized (Evers & Boer, 2012; Laslett & Rapoport, 2003).

3.4.3.2   Time horizon

Among the most important considerations for this study there is the point in time at which to conduct the interviews. To the researcher's best knowledge, there is little or no literature setting ground rules regarding at what intervals should data collection episodes of longitudinal research occur. As explained above, the phases outlined in the U-curve model of intercultural contact does not provide a viable option, because the process of acculturation is rather dialectical (Thomas and Harrell, 1994, as cited in Brown & Holloway, 2008; Gao & Gudykunst, 1990; Pedersen, 1995; Ward et al., 1998). Brown (2009) explored the transformative power of the international student sojourn longitudinally but did not provide

exact explanation as to how she has established the right timing for her data collection episodes. In a previous publication using the same data, the author conceptualized the international students' adjustment process as unpredictable and dynamic, and deliberately suppressed any prescribed time pattern in the elaboration of the adjustment model (Brown & Holloway, 2008) Guthrie and Anderson (2010) investigated visitor narratives while the experience was taking place, but they carried out a one off data collection episode. Thus in this study decisions regarding the most suitable time for data collection are based on the consideration of the processes involved and on the institutional academic calendar that paces the student exchange.

In deciding when to conduct the interviews, the researcher contemplated the phases of the prospective processes. From the brand ambassadorship perspective, it has been discussed that organizations have space to intervene to influence the likelihood of succeeding in forming brand ambassadors. The first opportunity is to act on the pre-existing individuals' personal characteristics: if chosen properly these are positive antecedents of brand citizenship attitudes and behaviours (King & Grace, 2012), of nation brand identification (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011) and of destination brand advocacy (Sahin & Baloglu, 2014). The literature on migrants acculturation has consistently found that personal traits are antecedents of the extent to which individuals suffer under acculturative stress, and therefore is less likely to integrate with or assimilate the host culture (Schmitz, 2005). It has also been argued that perceived cultural distance affects pre-trip attitudes towards the destination (Nyaupane et al., 2008).

To account for these traits and to capture their influence on exchange students in relation to their acculturation, destination relationship and destination brand ambassadorship formation processes, the first interviews were conducted via Skype *prior* to the participants' arrival. Expectations, perceptions, identities and values elicited before the experience are less likely to drift into over- or under-statement due to the actual encounters (Hui et al., 2007).

Associations that respondents hold towards the destination at this stage are likely to be organic images, influenced by their previous accumulated knowledge, and partially by their personalities, prior experiences, motivations and perceived knowledge.

After conducting the Skype interviews, an interview was conducted upon arrival (within one week from their arrival in HK). One reason for carrying out an interview upon arrival relates to the intention of the researcher to address the interviewees' identification with the destination (an aspect of the relationship established with it). After considerations, the researcher decided to separate questions regarding identification from those regarding interviewees' prior opinion about the destination between the first and second data collection episodes. Asking about these two aspects during the same conversation might lead respondents to strive for consistency in their answers, by matching the characteristics of their personality with expressed opinions about the city. The researcher instead first investigated the respondents' idea and image of Hong Kong *before* departure, and investigated aspects of their personality upon arrival. During the face-to-face conversations the researcher was able to gain a better understanding of their personality not only from their verbal accounts, but also from their behaviours in the destination and during the interview. A second reason to conduct the interviews upon arrival is to capture the very beginning of the process of acculturation in the destination, namely the first contact between the culture of origin and the culture that prevails locally. The encounter between two cultures triggers a conflict leading individuals to determine the extent of discrepancy between their own norms and values and those of the host culture. Individuals then engage in active coping by trying out different acculturation strategies to fine tune the trade-off between retaining their own culture and adapting to the host culture (Schmitz, 2005). The unfolding of this acculturation process potentially affects the attitudes of the ambassadors towards the destination through the relationship established with it.

One desired attitude is that of psychological ownership or attachment to the brand. As discussed during the literature review, such attitude depends mostly on the ambassadors' self-identification with a brand (Escalas, 2004b; Morhart et al., 2009; Xiong & King, 2015). Previous research found that identification with the brand is an antecedent of advocacy (Sahin & Baloglu, 2014; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). In the context of tourists destinations, identification can be symbolized through place attachment (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008), or the feeling of oneness and membership towards the destinations' society (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Identification is supported by self-brand connections (the brand expresses significant aspects of the consumer's self) (Fournier, 1998) and by the development of positive relationships with the society in the destination (King et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2009; Xiong et al., 2013). The researcher investigates the development of participants' identification through the relationship progressively built with the destination.

As individuals make decisions about appropriate acculturation strategies, they are setting the basis for adaptation and basing their relationship with the destination on it (Schmitz, 2005). Therefore, with the following rounds of in-depth interviews the researcher investigates how these individual-destination interactions unfold for exchange students. The in-depth interviews following the *on arrival* data collection episode will have to concentrate on the identification of attitudes and the way they evolve together with the acculturation process and the destination relationship.

The researcher considered the following considerations when determining the timing of these interviews which were conducted *during* the period of exchange. From the calendar of the MISS office at PolyU it emerges clearly that in the initial phase of the semester the University introduces students to the destination by organizing dedicated cultural and social activities (MISS, 2015). To hear student accounts during the orientation phase, namely the phase of first contacts with the destination, an in-depth interview was carried out within the

first week from arrival. Subsequently, the researcher repeated in-depth interviews throughout the semester at regular intervals in order to capture the changes. Conversations were scheduled at intervals that would allow the respondents to remember the previous conversation and potentially share thoughts regarding changes of heart.

With the two major holidays throughout the semester being Chinese New Year (5/6 weeks after commencement of the term) and Easter (11/12 weeks after commencement of the terms) the two following interviews were scheduled after each one of these holidays at the students' availability. At these points in time there was an increased chance that students had explored the destination and/or taken trip in and out of Hong Kong, adding to their familiarity with Hong Kong within the Asian context.

The last data collection episodes aimed at understanding what status the relationship with the destination had reached. The interview at the semester end (1/2 weeks before leaving the destination) uncovered impressions that the student was "taking away". The last interview, carried out *a posteriori* (after the exchange has been concluded and following departure), had two primary rationales. Firstly, the students had been in touch personally with the audience of their experience narrative once back home; secondly they had time to recollect the memories of the exchange semester and to compare it with home. Exchange students participated in another Skype interview at least a couple of weeks after returning home or establishing themselves elsewhere: this allowed for comparisons, gave time to the students to digest their experience and impressions and finally allowed them to give account of their face-to-face story-telling regarding Hong Kong.

The exchange lasts one term which corresponds to four months from the beginning of January to the beginning of May. The researcher conversed with respondents before and after, to elicit responses without and with the experience of the destination. In addition, the researcher elicited respondents' account of their experience *during* the exchange period.

136

Hence, data collection episodes were repeated before, during and after the exchange period. Starting circa one month before and terminating circa one month after the exchange period students were interviewed last one month and non-later than 6 weeks after the termination of the exchange. For a detailed overview of the academic calendar in the applicable University see the appendix.

Figure 3 - Interview Timeline

A priori Interviews via Skype 1 to 20 December 2015 5 to 3 weeks before commencement of exchange period	Interview on arrival face-to-face 11 to 18 January 2016 0 to 1 week from commencement of exchange	Interviews during exchange period face-to-face 11 to 15 February 2016 29 March to 5 April 2016 4 to 5 and 11 to 12 weeks from commencement of exchange period	Interview at departure face-to-face 10 to 17 May 2016 Maximum one week from departure	A posteriori interview upon return to country of normal residence 1 to 20 June 2016 3 to 6 weeks from departure

3.4.3.3 Interviewing

Responsive interviewing is most successful when researchers consider the emotional intensity levels throughout the conversation. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that the researcher starts by introducing herself, works her way into the conversation by first asking simple questions that are not threatening to the respondent, and only later, when both researcher and informant feel comfortable with each other, ask more thought provoking or tougher questions. As noted by Evers and Boer (2012), new terms are constantly being introduced to refer to instruments used to give a certain structure to interviews (Checklist, Guide, Interview Guide, Interview Protocol, Topic list…). The researcher chose the general name Conversation Guide to refer to the aid used to monitor the main topics during the interviews. In this sense the interviews here employ a semi-structured format. Compared to unstructured interviews, the researcher attempts to focus on a list of planned items that inform on the research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The proposed conversation guide serves the researcher as a reminder of all the topics that need to be covered, and as a possible script of how questions and probes could be formulated and asked. Yet, the researcher is aware of the fact that questions and probes might have to be refined and slightly modified from one interview to the following and from one interviewee to the other, but also that the interviewee might cover the topics in a different order from that proposed in the guide (Evers & Boer, 2012; Hennink et al., 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher should not interrupt this flow but at the same time make sure that all the answers are given. This possibility is part of the inductive nature of qualitative research, which holds that the researcher should make inferences from the issues that emerge from each data collection episode to refine the questions and to go deeper into these issues (Gorden,

1992; Hennink et al., 2011). In addition, the researcher designed the conversation guide by keeping in mind that the interview should be as reminiscent as possible of a normal conversation whereby the respondent is a "full conversational partner, not a passive information provider" (Evers & Boer, 2012, p. 45). The interviewer proposed therefore low-key and open-ended questions that could encourage the interviewee to spontaneously raise issues that are important to them (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Given that most interviewees were non-English native speakers, the researcher had to continuously adjust the wording of the questions to the specific respondents' abilities and to their improvement over time in English proficiency (Evers & Boer, 2012). In particular, to make the interview questions understandable, the researcher had to translate the abstract topics into colloquial phrases (Hennink et al., 2011). A clear example concerns questions regarding self-identification and congruity between the interviewee and the destination. Directly asking participants whether they identify with the destination is abstract, and difficult to articulate. Therefore the researcher formulated the question as "Given your personality, is Hong Kong a suitable place for you?" / "Why do you think Hong Kong is the right place for you?" / "Is Hong Kong a good place for someone with your character and personality?". Each interviewee responded to different ways of phrasing this, but overall the researcher managed to find the appropriate fit for each student. This particular question proved challenging, therefore sometimes the response that was sought for could not emerge, but had to be inferred from statements at other points of the conversation in other contexts. For example, Jasper casually dropped a conversation about eventually settle in Hong Kong or Singapore for his studies' mandatory internship. The researcher, therefore, tried to elaborate: "I: could you see yourself in HK in the long term?

J: yeah easily. There is everything that i want, that i need, that i look for. So, yeah, i don't see why not. It's perfect. I think that I would like it here a lot better than in the Netherlands." [fourth interview].

Regarding in-depth interview stages the researcher chose to follow the suggestions proposed by Hennink et al. (2011) and by Rubin and Rubin (2012). These authors highlight the importance of continuously implementing modifications required by the specific circumstances. Ideally, the interview should start with the researcher introducing herself and the research topic. This is important to let the respondent know what use will be made of the collected data and to establish a connection. Because the study is longitudinal, the introduction of the researcher's and of the study's background was done thoroughly, but only once, at the first interview via Skype. It was expected that the respondents would retain the relevant information from the first interview; in addition, these were outlined in the information sheet and the consent form each one of them received and signed.

After the introduction, the researcher made use of opening questions that are central to the research topic but easy, and that could provide respondents with confidence about their ability to respond. This way the researcher successfully set the tone of the conversation as non-threatening. Since the relationship with the respondent was initiated at the first interview, in the following encounters the researcher sought to re-establish the connection. Because the informant knew the researcher and was familiar with the process, the preliminary conversation was around shared events: this way the respondent felt not only that the researcher was knowledgeable about their experience, and that she was not only interested in getting information from them (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviewees repeatedly thanked the interviewer for being patient regarding their English level and for caring about their

stories, which suggests the researcher successfully showed empathy. For example, in the first two interviews Charlotte struggled with articulating her answers in English, but the researcher tried to encourage her and reassure her. "C: you can always understand me, and I am so thankful. Thank you so much!" [second interview].

The researcher advanced to tougher questions only after some time into the conversation. Most respondents tackled them with relative ease, though certain questions seemed to unsettle or confuse some of the respondents. For example, "how would you describe yourself?" and "why is Hong Kong the right place for you?". As suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2012) in these cases the researcher helped respondents get started with their answers, or when necessary came back to the topic later, with a different wording.

In the final phase of the interview the researcher should provide closure, diminish the emotional level demanded by the interview and allow the respondent to take charge. As Rubin and Rubin (2012) put it, "after the interviewee has been so open, it is only fair that you answer what is on his or her mind about your experiences, opinions, and findings." (p. 112). This proved to be true, and it helped in strengthening the relationship with respondents over time. By asking the researcher personal questions, respondents found grounds to relate to her, to feel they could be understood and to realize the personal and academic relevance she attached to the study. As a result, all respondents successfully stuck with the process until the end. For example, in the first interviews some students were curious as to why the researcher had selected Hong Kong as a study destination for her PhD. Later on students asked the researcher whether she could recommend places to go, or they would recommend her things to try.

Finally, the researcher would conclude each interview by resuming informal chatting, hence providing closure but also anticipating future contact. At times in this phase respondents delivered additional information. For example, in one of the last interviews, one of the respondents commented on the fact that the researcher's brother was visiting Hong Kong by recommending places she should take him to.

Regarding the design of questions, coherence was sought between the wording of the questions and the conceptual framework, research question and research objectives. Interview questions are a form of operationalization of the research question (Evers & Boer, 2012). Therefore, the formulation of the interviews starts from considering the three observed processes:

(1) Acculturation: manifests itself through the negotiations between cultures, the chosen strategy and through changes at the individual level;

(2) Relationship: manifests itself through chosen lifestyle and satisfaction of needs within the destination's place and society;

(3) Ambassadorship: manifests itself as the exchange students' personal and online communication about the destination.

Therefore, changes were needed to data collection regarding the following elements:

1. *Pre-trip*: motivations, previous experience [according to Wu and Wilkes (2017) previous travel abroad and migration experiences affect the views of international students about what is home and about their migration intentions] and personal characteristics + expectations and impressions about the destination + expectations about the self in the destination;

2. *On arrival:* self-reported personal characteristics + perceived differences and cultural distance + first impressions about the destination

3. *During [acculturation and relationship]:* perceived selves (identity and values) + needs satisfaction by the destination + interactions with the destination and its society = Degree of identification with the destination, emotional investment with the destination's society, sense of place and place attachment.

4. *During [ambassadorship]:* personal and online communication about the destination (what, to whom and when) + self-representation through narratives

5. *After [acculturation, relationship, ambassadorship]*: Degree of identification with the destination, emotional investment with the destination's society, sense of place and place attachment. Evaluation of experience.

For easy representation and use, the researcher organized each question into a table with subheadings that identify the purpose of the specific question and the main concept(s) they refer to. To see the detail of the conversation guide, please refer to the appendix 8.3.4.

3.4.3.4   Verbal data analysis

In the current study the researcher asks how exchange students recount their experience in Hong Kong and illustrates the process of sense making. In particular, the researcher sought a research design that could do justice to the longitudinal nature of the research and to the fact that the phenomenon under investigation is a process. In this study data analysis was carried out as a continuous and iterative process, starting from listening to participants and ending with the refinements made in the phase of reporting the findings (Maxwell, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2014). Another

important characteristic of the study design is the distinction between a descriptive and an explanatory phase (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The descriptive phase of data analysis comprises

- embryonic analysis carried out during the data collection in the form of taking notes;

- ensuing initial analysis carried out while transcribing in the form of *memoing* and marking notable quotations;

- formal analysis carried out with the purpose to organize the data through data management;

- display of the organization of the data into matrices based on the developed thematic framework;

In the explanatory research phase, the researcher reasons on the data and generates her own theory. The explanatory phase, or the interpretive analysis, is based on the principles of narrative analysis. The benefit of narrative analysis consists in the attention to the details and the focus on sequential and structural features that are the hallmarks of narratives. Narrative inquirers analyse extended accounts, while other qualitative inquiry traditions employ category-centred approaches in which snippets of interviews are edited out of contexts and coded into units (Riessman, 2008). The approach based on categorization of the data is here combined with closer analysis of individual cases through narrative analysis. In fact, narratives from interview data provide the basis for elaboration of rich thematic materials (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Thematic analysis on narrative data focuses on *what* is said, on the "told" rather than on the "telling" (Mishler, 1995), hence highlighting how stories can have effects beyond the meanings individual storytellers attach to them (Riessman, 2008). Little is said about the conditions in which the narrative is produced, which lets the account

appear as if it emerged from the self of the narrator rather than from a conversation (Riessman, 2008).

Thematic analysis has been applied here to familiarize the researcher with the verbal text and to organize the data into categories. This follows a non-representational approach that reflects the compositional analysis applied to the photographs. It should be noted that narrative scholars approach thematic analysis slightly differently than other traditions, because they strive to preserve sequence and keep the story intact, therefore theorising from the case rather than from the themes emerging across cases. Transcripts were here analysed based on themes that are developed by the researcher based on prior theory, the purpose of the study, and the data themselves (Riessman, 2008).

According to Riessman (2008), the construction of the narrative data that will be then analysed already starts with interviewing and transcribing practices. This can be understood through an analogy between language and photographs. Photographs seemingly portray reality but actually different technologies make it possible to produce several different images that portray the same exact object. The same way an image reflects the photographers' views, conceptions and values about what is important, so does language, which is not a "perfectly transparent medium of representation" (White, 1976, p. 272). Therefore transcribing, like photographing is an interpretive practice because it fixates what happened in an interview in a written form (Riessman, 2008).

The researcher followed a step-by-step approach to the development of the thematic framework. She has begun with descriptive analysis since the moment of data collection, through data transcription and finally purposely analysed the transcribed data for the purpose of creating organizational categories. The latter phase

of analysis was aimed at rendering the data more easily manageable and providing an initial description of their content. The categories were refined and fine-tuned through processes of open and focused coding. To see a detailed account of how the descriptive analysis of the verbal data was carried out, the reader can refer to the appendix 8.3.3.

At this point the researcher developed a list of categories. The first step involved mapping how chunks of data link together into a whole comprehensive narrative of the research. The researcher chose to present the categories in an order based on a logic progression according to different levels of generality, hence in a hierarchical arrangement (Ritchie et al., 2014; Warren & Karner, 2010). She selected the organizational categories and subcategories identified during familiarization, open coding and focused coding and that had sufficient examples in the data to illustrate them (Warren & Karner, 2010). The final result of this organization is a thematic framework. The thematic framework combines emergent topics, topics derived from research questions and objectives, and topics derived from the topic/interview guide. It is a conceptually clear structure of the data, that helps reducing overlaps and omissions (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Using the thematic framework, the researcher returned to the data to undertake indexing and sorting, hence the labeling of chunks of data with the names of the categories and subcategories (Ritchie et al., 2014). Indexing consists in applying the same label to chunks of data that are about the same thing. Labels hence show which category or subcategory is being mentioned or referred to, and would be later used for data retrieval. Another advantage of applying labels is the possibility to sort the data. Sorting means assembling chunks of similar content across transcripts in the same location. This allows the researcher to focus on each topic in turn, to unpack the detail

and distinctions that lie within. Indexing and sorting are also referred to as coding. Basically in this phase the transcripts are coded according to the thematic framework. Coding was carried out through the use of the qualitative analysis software Nvivo, which allows not only an extremely simple retrieval of data, but also re-arranging and organizing the codes into a hierarchy.

After finalizing data indexing, the researcher could conclude the analytic description with a comprehensive visualization of the data. As suggested by Maxwell (2013) and Ritchie et al. (2014), the researcher proceeded to display the data in thematic matrices based on the thematic framework developed. All the data that had been labeled with the same name were brought together in a thematic set through the use of NVivo query function.

3.4.3.4.1 Explanatory analysis

For consistency with the procedure carried out with the visual data in the previous phase, the researcher analyzed interview transcripts for each informant according to the chronological order of the six data collection episodes and based on the principles of familiarization, open coding and organizational categorization. As a result, the researcher compiled a matrix of organizational categories for each interviewee. These matrices were each built progressively based on the previously analysed respondents, and were subsequently analysed aggregately to fine-tune the definition and naming of the categories across respondents. For the researcher notes and tracking of the progressive and iterative modification of categories and their names see [insert appendix on the creation of categories].

The organizational categories proposed by Maxwell (2013) served the purpose of organizing the data in a manageable format in preparation for interpretive analysis

by offering a comprehensive and cohesive overview of the collected data. Now the researcher uses this basis to investigate relationships and connections that answer the research question. This is the phase is which the researcher develops her own theory based on the data collected (Maxwell, 2013).

Through explanatory analysis the researcher provided "[s]ummary statements, causal explanations, or conclusions" that explain why something happened, show the relationships between two or more concepts or how participants feel about a topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 194). The researcher asked herself how concepts introduced by the interviewees could go together and she purposely looked in the transcript,s for explanations and causes for the phenomena of interest in her investigation. In this phase the researcher followed the principles of narrative analysis, as proposed in Riessman (1990) and Gubrium and Holstein (2009).

3.4.3.4.1.1 Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis concerns "*how* and *why* incidents are storied" (p. 11), hence uncovers why respondents narrate certain events in a certain way; what is achieved by narrating them in that way; and how is the audience affected (Riessman, 2008). The researcher is interested in how events are linked together; linked to the respondents' past, present and future; linked to respondents' identity, relationships and places (Smith, 2017).

As previously explained, the way narratives are told reveals how individuals construct meaning about places and experiences, what they emphasize or hide and how they share them with others (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Smith, 2017). The latter aspect is particularly relevant to investigations of destination ambassadorship. Participants' narratives are in this study the form of destination ambassadorship under

149

investigation. These may include stories, defined as "[…] ready to use, like a jack-in-the-box, ready to spring when someone opens the lid by asking 'what happened'?" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this sense the participants' stories about their experience in the destination are a plausible approximation of what they will be telling others about their time in Hong Kong.

In allowing participants to elaborate on their anecdotes, the researcher asked them to conclude their discussions. This simplified the narrative analysis process, whereby she could identify stories around stand-alone anecdotes. Subsequently, she investigated the function that they performed in the experience and in making sense of it. Thoughts developed around the anecdotes through interactions with the interlocutor (the researcher) and they were reshaped over time from one data collection episode to another.

Storytellers do not merely communicate information and pre-packaged stories, but they also actively shape their accounts. The act of re-telling through post hoc narratives is a way for tourist story-tellers to, consciously or unconsciously, clarify whether they consider a particular experience as good or bad. Hence, narratives reflect their inner lives and social worlds and analysing them is a way of analysing experiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Investigating narratives through interviews sheds light on how their construction depend on the individuals' social situated-ness and the perspective of a certain audience (Riessman, 2008). By linking the separate parts provided in the interviews into a whole, meaning is placed into context (Smith, 2017).

Narrative textual analysis was attempted. This would have allowed achieving the same non-representational purpose of the compositional analysis applied to photographs. In fact, a textual analysis focused on narratives' internal organization

potentially identifies discernible and repeated structures. Focusing on the use of language and on how participants assemble and order events corresponds' to describing verbal communication's face value. Yet, searching for commonalities in structures and vernacular of the analysed narratives proved unavailing because the respondents are for the biggest part non-native English speakers. The diversity of native languages they spoke made it so that the narrative strategies chosen to story episodes differed widely.

Textual analysis alone is insufficient to explain narratives' social situated-ness and the meaning making process (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2008). The sense and sense-making process of the storytelling was investigated through an analysis of the social organization of narratives. Narrative reality was viewed as a matter of everyday life to shed light on how storytelling is designed for various recipients; how narratives' organization produce situationally adequate stories; what is at stake for the narrators in their social world and the consequences for their identities of telling the stories in particular ways (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

The researcher is aware that collecting data via interviewing has some limitations. Textual material is drawn from participants' accounts on the occasions they are asked or prompted to. Boundaries are erected around the narrated experiences as they are turned into concrete texts through transcriptions or recording. Rather than the storytelling process itself, these texts are by-products of it (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Yet the context in which they are told is as important to their reality as the texts themselves. Therefore, the researcher understands here narrative as "narrative reality" to do justice to the socially situated practice of storytelling. The research strives to explore the contexts in which such narratives are formed and told, to include accounts provided within as well as outside formal interviews (Gubrium & Holstein,

2009). The narratively contingent conditions of assembling an account and the consequences for the storyteller of storying experiences in particular ways are here taken into account; "Whoever heard of a story being told nowhere and at no time?" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 22).

"Narrative ethnography" is the chosen approach to analyse narrative reality. This is a method of ethnographic fieldwork that allows not only to take note of the substantive dimensions of accounts but also of the accounting process and how circumstances shape it. By paying attention to story formation, narrative ethnography identifies the circumstances, actors and actions involved in the process of formulating and communicating accounts and focuses on the everyday narrative activity that unfolds within situated interaction (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). As posited by Gubrium and Holstein (2009), researchers investigating narratives have to engage into analytic bracketing. In this case the method is intended as the procedure of intermittently shifting analytic focus between narrative work and its environment throughout the research process. "Narrative work" is defined as the interactional activity through which narratives are constructed, communicated, sustained and/or reconfigured; "the everyday work done to assemble and communicate accounts".

Narratives may also be viewed as stories recurring in an extended framework, as part of a communicative process and of circumstances in which over time meaningful and important events are selected. Therefore, the researcher also interpreted the "narrative environments", hence the circumstances and contingent meanings storytellers are up against in different occasions. By shifting focus back and forth between the two the researcher investigates the *hows* and the *whats* of narrative reality and the ways they are reflexively intertwined. The result is a discussion of how

the substance of the narratives about Hong Kong is influenced by and recast in different communicative circumstances.

In doing so the researcher was cautious to avoid neglecting the situated-ness of the interview episodes themselves, and considered context. In particular, she had to consider the interactional terrain of the interview, by virtue of which the processes of narrative were activated (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The narrative activation involved in the interview process is an important element of the chosen interview design to resemble a conversation. Different requests from the interviewer could move accounts in different directions. For example, participants sometimes hesitated to explain certain events. This may suggest complexity, or the participant struggles in explaining causations, but it may also be a circumstantial situation. As interviews were carried out in public places, often around campus, the researcher had to consider factors such as fear of being overheard or shyness. Paying attention to context is part of this research, because it allows to appropriately understanding how narrators organize facts to persuade their audiences (Riessman, 2008, p. 23). In addition to that, the researcher considered how narratives were put together following activation in a way that is meaningful for the anticipated audience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

Finally, the researcher will subsequently discuss the situational terrain of the analysed narratives, namely the landscape of meaning-making, by virtue of which the same account's meaning can be substantially transformed in different circumstances. Based on the consequences of the meaning-making the researcher was able to spot occasioned differences provided by the vocabularies and categories preferred by narrators at different times (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

Once the narrative analysis was conducted separately on data collected from each participant, the researcher produced a story that pieces together the disparate

elements of the respondents' entire experience by linking them from the start till the end (Smith, 2017).

3.4.4   Verbal and visual data: the triangulation of findings

The content analysis of visuals has limitations: it cannot account for their meaning, for making sense of their patterns and frequencies or for uncovering the underlying motifs (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012). For the purposes of this research, images are considered as useful visual research tools because the interest and emphasis is not confined to the photograph as an artefact and to what it represents, but also to the practices and processes underpinning their creation and display, and in the significance and meaning that the tourist photographer attributes to them (Scarles, 2012). For these reasons, researchers rarely analyse visuals alone and often use them together with other methods such as interviews, observations and focus groups so that the respondents can express experiences and further communication about them (Rakic & Chambers, 2012; Scarles, 2012).

In responding to the compositional analysis limitations, the researcher used the pictures that were posted by respondents as elicitation tools during the interviews. This allowed the researcher to "'hear tourists 'readings' of their own photography practices" (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012, p. 157). It allows for respondent reflexivity, stimulates discussion and facilitates the collaboration between respondent and researcher, a dynamic performance that mobilizes the construction of knowledge and a deeper, more meaningful conversational exchange (Scarles, 2012). Through respondent-led photo-elicitation the respondent becomes the producer, creator and the director of the visuals that are encountered during the research process (Scarles, 2012), shifting the authority from the interviewer towards the respondent, who becomes auto-driven (Andersson Cederholm, 2012). Andersson Cederholm (2012) argues for a

social constructionist approach to photo-elicitation in the interview context, whereby the interviewer is seen as a participant observer and as a co-creator of the reality constructed by participants. This is based on understanding that the narratives and the accounts of the interviewees are not conveyed exclusively through words, but also through practices. The way that respondents relate their stories and show their photographs is relevant to the interview, because it captures how they narrate and frame their own experiences. In other words, the interview has to be interpreted as a kind of observation, which means that both the content of the words and the "how you do things with words" are crucial for analysis (Andersson Cederholm, 2012, p. 93).

Overall the advantages of using participant-produced photographs in interviews can be summarized as follows: they provide the respondent with more authority and control in the interview process; participant-produced photographs encourage respondents to spontaneous photo-elicitation, and this can contribute to understand the role that photography plays in the respondents' life; it helps understanding how tourist experiences are visualized (Andersson Cederholm, 2012). These characteristics allow the researchers to tackle the connectedness and immediateness of social media communications that have been technology enabled and are intertwined with visual cultures and everyday lives (Pink, 2013).

Photographs of the Hong Kong experience represent visual narratives through which visitors "make sense of their destination experience"; capture significant aspects of their experience; approximate how they recount their experiences to others; and identify shared images of Hong Kong (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010; MacKay & Couldwell, 2004; Michaelidou et al., 2013; Scarles, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014). Visual story-telling also actualizes visitors *de facto* role as spokespersons for Hong Kong, since they may transmit and disseminate images through their personal networks

(Bærenholdt et al., 2004). For the foregoing reasons, photographs have been adopted as the unit of investigation.

3.4.5   Validity and reflexivity: learning from the interview process

Several changes occurred within the research process and the researcher herself as the researcher progressively conducted the interviews. Such changes will be recounted here as they resulted from reflection on her own performance. In seeking to balance between involvement and detachment and to truly understand respondents without taking a stand (Evers & Boer, 2012), the researcher learned much about her neutrality and how to improve it.

Responsive interviewing led to the establishment of mutual relationships with the respondents. During interactive interviewing, both the respondent and the researcher share personal and social experiences. Both sides' insights and feelings are important. Hence the researcher told the participants' stories in the context of developing relationships (Ellis et al., 1997). The challenge of the fieldwork was for the researcher to maintain rapport with participants while also maintaining validity. Establishing a trustful relationship is particularly important for longitudinal studies. In fact the researcher needs to maintain the students' long term commitment to her research, while also aiming at depth of information (Laslett & Rapoport, 2003).

To establish an open and equal relationship with the interviewees since the very beginning, the researcher sought recommendations from representatives of the Mainland and International Student Services (MISS) office at the University where the study was being carried out. The suggestion received was to secure an on-going relationship with the students by acting as a "PolyU buddy", a person of reference for exchange students that provides them with guidance and support.

The option of the researcher acting as a "PolyU Buddy" was precluded for the following reasons. The researcher would be actively influencing one of the processes under investigation: acculturation. As a "PolyU buddy" she would be active part in that acculturation process by helping students to adjust, with the risk of steering it in a certain direction. Another issue relates to her role as an interviewer. Knowing her also as a "PolyU buddy", exchange students might have problems discerning her role of buddy from that of researcher. This may prevent them from talking about actual difficulties or from voicing dissatisfaction with the University. Or, on the contrary, they might struggle to focus on the purpose of the interviews and try to use them as occasions to address problems that they are facing with the hope that she could solve them.

Though the option of actively engaging with exchange students as a University buddy was ruled out, one aspect was retained: being considered by respondents as a fellow (international) student. Leveraging on the fact that the researcher and the students belonged to the same group strengthened their collaboration spirit. They understood the researcher's obligations, the need of putting together a thesis and complying with academic obligations. In addition, being an international student herself, they expected her to share the same sense of "foreignness" (Bochner, McLeod, & Anli, 1977). Exchange students intuitively anticipated that the interviewer had been through a similar process before them, and that she could better understand both the difficulties and the excitements they are faced with.

The researcher nonetheless established good relations with her participants, and these have in some cases outlasted the period of the data collection (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Yet, in sharing her own emotions and experiences the researcher had to be careful not to lead the interviewee to answer in ways that she needed or expected

(Rubin & Rubin, 2012). She was also careful to record narratives in the participants' own words rather than translating it into the language of the investigator (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

The researcher has evaluated her interviewing technique throughout the process. As recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2012) she has:

1. re-listened to interviews after carrying them out to catch for errors and improve them for the following interviews. This practice brought, for example to changing the order of some questioning. Originally the researcher planned to ask respondents to start discussing their experience by showing her the most representative photos they shared. Yet, this seemed to unsettle respondents, who rather started by talking about what they had been up to, and what they had most recently done in the few days preceding the interview.

2. by showing difficulties in answering certain questions or by responding in a deceptive manner, respondents were actually telling that the researcher was not asking the right questions. One of these was "why do you think Hong Kong is the right place for you, for your personality?". This question was hard to understand. Informants could not grasp what kind of information the researcher was after. Hence, to some of the informants, the researchers asked instead if they would choose Hong Kong as a place to live in.

The researcher also strove for analytic bracketing. Being aware of her stance as an international student, she was careful to separate her own experience and to stay open to the meanings and viewpoints of her participants. On the one hand, her personal experience as an international student in the destination provided her with empathy for the respondents' difficulties and sharing of their positive experiences. On the other hand, she had to deal with the unpredictability of the individual participants'

respondents, and adapt her research narrative to their own content, rhythm and thematic choices (Evers & Boer, 2012). This was done by, firstly, keeping in mind that interviews are a dynamic process and secondly by staying aware of each participants' individuality. Triangulating interviews with visual data and an extensive use of prompting during the interviews (in particular based on the individual participants' English proficiency) allowed the researcher respect the respondents' own truth.

Finally, it has been a clear challenge for the researcher to maintain her neutrality. This involves being able to consider her own personality, baggage, and prejudices. In particular, the researcher had to prevent herself from incurring in imbalances in terms of involvement and detachment, and hence from taking a stand. She was well aware of the type of challenges and experiences that her participants were living and recounting. But for the sake of being neutral, she had to first recollect memories of what they meant to her and how they played out in her own memory, to make sure not to bring her perspective into the participants' accounts. This was done by means of writing down notes at each interview, on what memories were awaken in her by the topics discussed with her respondents. Subsequently, during the analytic phase, the researcher had to maintain awareness of these notes. The exploration of the data was useful in this sense, as it let new topics and new issues arise, as it will be discussed later in section 4.2.

4   **Results**

The following results section constitutes a sizeable part of the overall study. The complexity of the research methods and the variety of types of data required a particularly detailed exploration of the results. As anticipated in the methodology chapter, the researcher employed four different types of data analysis in order to achieve the aims of more-than-representational research. More-than-representational research uncovers the meanings behind human actions by considering that nonconscious automatic knowledge and the senses are partly responsible for how and why these actions occur. As a result, more-than-representational research also acknowledges the context in which actions are locally situated.

The data analysis processes consisted of four types of analysis.

First, the researcher took a non-representational approach to the analysis of visual narratives. The researcher previously discussed that viewers encounter tourist-generated photographs in multiple localities, contexts and ways. The context of production and reception of an online photograph are separated. When viewed at face-value, online photographs are semiotic potentials made of formal components, compositional structures, and communicative resources (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). As such, they have their own agency, beyond and independelty from the meanings that producers originally attributed to them (Rakic, 2012; Rose, 2012). The current study starts from addressing such agency. It did so through a haptic and sensorial experiencing of the photographs, with a view to uncovering the affective impact of ambassadorship. The researcher achieved this through compositional analysis, a thorough discussion of defined compositional elements. The affective

impact of the images was described through a corporeal reading of the images through one element of the proposed scheme: expressive content. The form of the photographs was considered at face value and using the compositional analysis method facilitated revelations about aspects that may have evaded the conscious awareness of participants (Hill et al., 2014). In summary, images were described for *what* they contained and what they evoked. It is a hallmark of the non-representational approach to draw upon sensorial experiences to provide detailed descriptions (Hill et al., 2014). This was consistent with the researcher's non-representational aim of investigating the preconscious, subconscious or non-conscious unfolding of experiences (Xiao et al., 2013). The "ongoing, multiple and precarious" (Bajde, 2013, p. 237) makings of reality may have escaped the researcher's eye if she had tackled participant photographs as signifiers.

As a second step, the researcher applied the non-representational approach to the verbal ambassadorship. Similarly to how photographs had been interpreted for what they contained, the researcher investigated the verbal narratives by focusing on what the participant said. The method employed is the thematic analysis and involved the descriptive analysis of verbal data. As a result, the researcher compiled a thematic framework that presented the verbal narratives at face value, paralleling the composition of the photographs. The thematic framework provided a preliminary depiction of the ambassador formation process by describing themes such as triggers, acculturation, relationship, foundations and ambassadorship narratives (summarized below in Figure 10).

Through compositional analysis of photographs and thematic analysis of verbal narratives, the researcher described and organized the "*what*" of exchange students

ambassadorship. She thoroughly answered the questions: what is narrated through photographs? What is narrated through stories?

The third step involved uncovering the socio-cultural meanings behind these ambassadorships. It was found that a narrative analysis approach suited this research aim. When participants give accounts in the form of narratives, researchers are able to shed light on phenomena that initially appear insignificant, though are relevant local, situated conditions of the lives being researched (Lorimer, 2005). Through narrative analysis the researcher could show such situated conditions through the processes of acculturation and of the relationship with Hong Kong as a place. These two processes provided contingent meanings that participants confronted throughout their experience. Hence, the researcher could explain how respondents selected meaningful and important events as part of their respective narratives.

Interview excerpts that concerned narratives of Hong Kong and the way they were communicated were labelled as "Ambassadorship". Gathering these excerpts allowed the researcher to observe *how* narratives were sustained and reconfigured. By considering the contingent interview excerpts labelled as "Acculturation" and "Relationship", the researcher could understand *why* the narratives were sustained or reconfigured. Thanks to the latter process, the researcher could identify roles that participants held through the experience. Hence, she could uncover how participants narrated according to what was at stake for their identities in their social worlds (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

This phase has two primary outcomes. First, the situated-ness of the narratives is organised on the basis of identities to which participants aspire, as symbolized by three roles: exchange student, resident student and tourist. The researcher has shown how exchange students behave in different contexts (the situational reality given by

the status of acculturation and relationship with Hong Kong at each stage of the experience). Second, the alternating of these roles described the sequencing of the ambassadorial process. Acculturation, relationship, ambassadorship and roles converge in this narrative.

Finally, the fourth type of data analysis carried out in this study follows the more-than-representational approach. The researcher explains the reasons and meanings behind ambassadorship with and through its form. Therefore one of the novel elements of this research lies in the double approach to investigating the phenomenon of focus. Ambassadorship is here explained through both its sociocultural meaning and its affective impact. Another novel element is the triangulation of both the verbal and visual narratives to understand the embodied onflow of Hong Kong ambassadorship and its situated-ness. Thanks to this final step, the circle of the research process was closed, and the researcher unearthed the embodied *and* sociocultural process of becoming an ambassador for Hong Kong.

Table 6 below summarizes the achievements of the research methods deployed, the approach that was served, the type of data used, the research outcomes and its aims.

Table 6 – Deployment of research methods

Approach	Non-Representational	Non-Representational	Representational	More-than-representational
Method	Compositional Analysis	Thematic Analysis	Narrative Analysis	Triangulation
Data	Visual narrative	Verbal Narrative	Verbal narrative	Verbal and Visual narrative
Aim(s)	*What* - Sensorial and affective experience of the visual	*What* - Focus on what is told, stories' effects beyond their meanings	*How and why* - Explanation, understanding and representation	*Framework* - Understanding the embodied onflow of Hong Kong Ambassadorship
Research Outcome	Compositions	Thematic framework	Roles, sequential description of ambassadorial process	Process of becoming Hong Kong Ambassador

4.1 Results of visual data analysis

First the *content* of the collected images is considered. What features of Hong Kong do exchange students narrate through photographs? The researcher presents the results in terms of content, discussing the prioritisation of categories of content through the course of the experience.

Secondly, the researcher focuses on the *form* of exchange students' photographs. She discusses how the identified content categories relate to their composition and visual impact and how this changes over time.

4.1.1 What do photographs illustrate?

Participants starting their exchange predominantly featured photographs of the Hong Kong cityscape, either as night skylines or street views. Daylight views of the densely built high-rise areas were present, though less prominent. Photographs of specific objects also recur: Buddha statues and figures, colourful flowers at the Chinese New Year's market in Victoria Park or even piles of magazines arranged in

front of local convenience stores. Photographs of objects constituted much of the visual communication content about Hong Kong through the exchange period. During the initial stage the photographs portrayed particular buildings or urban installations. Subsequently these elements appeared as background for the participants and his/her companions. Iconic features of Hong Kong are portrayed through photographs of objects, buildings and installations. Photographs portraying the self and friends were infrequent during the initial phase, especially in the case of western tourists, as well as photographs prioritizing natural landscapes. These two latter categories occurred more frequently during the second and third data collection episodes.

Cityscapes and night skyline photographs are almost absent in the second phase. Attention has shifted towards natural landscapes, particularly beaches and seaside areas. Portrayals of details of the urban landscape also assumed importance during this phase, notably depictions of staircases on the hilly side of the Central district, bars and cafes along the steep streets of Soho, or shabby residential buildings in Causeway Bay. The most prominent aspect of visual communication during this period of the exchange was the appearance of images featuring destinations outside Hong Kong, such as in China (e.g. Guangzhou), Singapore and Taiwan. This phenomenon is associated with the increasing portrayal of the self and of friends, often as companions in travel related activities. The predominance of portraying objects is maintained, while increasing their co-occurrence with subjects, either the photographer's self or companions. The co-occurrence of people also affects photographs portraying buildings and installations and landscapes.

The third episode of visual data collection is representative of the phase immediately prior to student departures from Hong Kong. Interestingly, the sharing of pictures portraying personal items is most prevalent during this period: memorabilia

such as old tickets, cards and receipts from their Hong Kong experience arranged purposely on a desk display; a Hong Kong flag signed by all the exchange friends; a favourite Hong Kong dish or a pin gifted by a friend. The representation of self and of friends dominates during this phase, as well as the portrayal of new off-the-beaten-path Hong Kong attractions and destinations such as Tai O village on Lantau Island, and the Kadoorie Farms in the New Territories. The previously ubiquitous cityscapes are almost absent in this phase and are scarcely discernible as backgrounds to some photographs portraying the participants and their companions.

4.1.2   How are photographs composed?

In the following sections the researcher discusses the content categories mentioned above from the perspective of the shared compositions. The detailed description of the form of the photographs that follows responds to the study's non-representational aim to account for sensorial and affective experiences.

4.1.2.1   The Hong Kong cityscape

The first category refers to the Hong Kong cityscape. The applicable photographs represent Hong Kong's high-rise buildings, street views and aggregated architectural elements. Night skyline photographs are high in saturation, which makes the colourful lights stand out and contrast with the night sky, emphasizing their reflections on the seawater. Such strong contrast slightly reduces the modulation of individual colours. The colourfulness of the photos is provided by the rich hues of the city lights, against the backdrop of the dominant black or dark grey night sky. Most photographs are taken at a frontal angle, at ground level with respect to the portrayed buildings, albeit at some distance. Many photographs are taken from the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront walk looking towards the familiar and dramatic skyline of Hong Kong Island.

Figure 4 – Early examples of the Hong Kong night skyline

Daylight photographs of Hong Kong cityscapes are less dominant and display slightly different compositional choices. Colours are less vivid (less saturated), brighter, more modulated and the dominant hues are grey, white and blue. They are taken from higher viewpoints looking down to the buildings, and, similarly to night photographs, they make use of long distance shots.

The expressive content of the Hong Kong daylight cityscapes relates to perceptions of depth. Those taken from higher observation points, such as Victoria Peak, are dramatic because of their emphasis on altitude and on the vastness of the city. The viewer can better perceive the topography of the landscape in the daylight photographs by seeing the hillsides, the water and the shadows in-between buildings, while night-light photographs give more salience to the colours of the city lights, and make the distant buildings appear small, diverse and bright, thereby conveying a lively and buzzing sensation. Finally, in the night skyline photographs, the water gives a sense of distance and separation of the viewer from the "reality" of the big city.

4.1.2.2   Objects

Photographs portraying objects provide salience for a single material item, such as Hong-Kong-style French toast, the lockers of the famous gate at Cheung Chau Island, and a tray of panda-shaped buns. Salience is attributed by making the object occupy most of the frame, by reducing the space dedicated to the context and by

separating   the   object   from   other   features,   thereby   applying   strong   framing. Photographs   of   food   were   often   similarly   filtered   leading   to   less   saturation,   more brightness, more shading and with browns and yellows as predominant hues.

Figure 5 - Examples of food items

In some photographs tourists have more discretion over spatial arrangement of the objects that are typically placed at the centre of the frame and are the source of attention. During the first data collection phase objects were often singled out and photographed. Later these were more commonly portrayed in an engagement, either being held or on display. A typical example is the appearance in the frame of the student-photographer's hand, holding the portrayed object in a specific desired position: students show the viewer their interesting items such as a colourful purse, a Mickey Mouse box of popcorn against the backdrop of the Disneyl castle, or a Polaroid taken with some friends, in the foreground and as if they were interacting with it. All are close-up shots, most with a vertical angle looking down on the subject. Because of the closeness of the shot and the filtering it is often hard to tell which is the source or type of light. Objects that are depicted as being in use in the photographer's hands are portrayed as being on display and not in situations of day-to-day use.

The prevalent compositional strategies in these photos organize the viewer gaze towards them. As discussed above when defining the methodology, a photograph is an offer if its content is presented for the viewer's scrutiny as an object of contemplation. Viewer identification is achieved if they can see things from the photographer perspective (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Rose, 2012). Object photographs in this study achieve both aims. The viewer can contemplate the object *and* see it through the photographer's eyes. An example is a box that was received as a gift by a participant: rather than picturing it as being opened to use its content (hand cream), she holds it purposely in front of the camera in her hand, far from "where it belongs". The closeness of the shot, its angle and the volume arrangement prompts viewers to gaze at the objects "as if" being the photographer.

Figure 6 - Examples of pictures portraying objects engaging the student

Prior to their departure from Hong Kong, participants shared photos of objects such as collections of tickets that were used over the course of their experience; the Hong Kong flag signed by friends; the same henna tattoo imprinted on their hand along with a travel companion. The expressive content of such photographs is interesting because it is achieved through compositional choices and colour choices such as low saturation, low contrasts and even black and white. The photographer seems to be collecting memorabilia or souvenirs, not only by portraying objects that are representative of a soon to end experience through specific compositional choices.

4.1.2.3   Buildings and installations

Photographs of individual buildings portray various destination attributes. From a compositional point of view, the colour choices vary greatly, while the same strategic arrangements of volumes recur. Volumes are arranged to determine the salience of portrayed buildings and installations, typically centred in the frame and an object of focus. The elements around them are portrayed as ancillary, partially in the frame and often out of focus. Hence, framing and contextualization are compositional strategies of such images. The common choice of vertical angle in this category prompts the viewer to look up at the portrayed elements (low angle), and mostly from a frontal angle at a medium distance.

Notable examples of this category of photographs are temple gates, the LED roses installation in Admiralty, and the Bruce Lee statue at Tsim Sha Tsui Garden of Stars. The angle is the most substantial contribution to the photographs' expressive content. Low angles emphasize the sense of awe and contemplation from a lower viewpoint, while frontal angles suggest viewers' engagement with the depictions. As the experience advances, the portrayal of buildings and installations occurs along with people. Examples include "*selfies*" at the Big Buddha, the group photo in front of the Art Central installation; photographs with friends in front of the Student Hall's gala dinner poster and decorations; or the barbecue place surrounded by friends chatting and eating.

4.1.2.4   Natural landscapes

Photographs of natural landscapes progressively become prominent. The predominance of certain hues is common to most of these photos: greens and blues dominate as is evident in Figure 7. Most of the photographs are similarly bright and modulated, shot at long distance and portray Hong Kong's nature in the sunlight of

relatively clear days. In most cases the horizon line falls almost exactly at the centre, indicative of photographing straight ahead by the tourist at his/her own eye level. This common compositional trait also allows for a certain distribution of natural elements across the frame: as the horizon line corresponds to "where sky meets water" equal salience is given to both, while the actual centre of the frame is usually pinpointed by an element such as a hilly strip of land, or an island or a boat in the distance.

Figure 7 - Portrayals of natural landscapes

Contextualization occurs through the appearance of environmental elements in the foreground, even when at the side of the frame. Thanks to tree branches and green bushes protruding into the frame from the sides, the viewer can guess where the viewer was standing when clicking. Such compositional structure emphasizes identification, putting the viewer in the position of the photographer. Finally, the degree of saturation varies, typically based on the specific filtering that has been chosen by the student-photographer. In combination such elements contribute to the expressive content. The photographs provide a feeling of peaceful atmosphere by emphasising a pristine and green environment.

4.1.2.5   Urban spaces

From the second data collection episode, photographs portraying architectural elements of Hong Kong shift from depicting the cityscape and skyline towards more specific and less mainstream urban elements and architectural details. There are few, albeit major, commonalities of compositional element amongst such photographs. The choice of colours varies widely and with concrete grey being the only exception. The types and sources of light and the angles in each photograph are very different.

The biggest commonality concerns the volume arrangements and the interconnecting lines. From a compositional perspective, all of these photographs portray Hong Kong as an intricate urban structure. The compositional emphasis is on the intersecting lines and overlapping volumes. These respectively emphasize hilly topography and dramatize resi-density. The images below in Figure 8 exemplify such visual impacts. In particular, the photo below (sixth photo at the bottom right) portraying Causeway Bay is a good representation of Hong Kong's clutter and layers. The first layer in this image is the flyway in the foreground from which the photograph is taken. Behind it, low-rise buildings are a strong representation of an urban anthill against the backdrop of tall skyscrapers, the iconic elements of Hong Kong's organic image. A similar effect is given by the photograph portraying a sports field in the foreground of a "wall" of tall buildings (fourth photo at the bottom left corner). Finally, the fountain at Tai Po Waterfront Park, with its perspective lines projecting towards the openness of the sea, provides a glimpse into a less "touristy" Hong Kong area but also emphasises Hong Kong's "openness" (5th photo at the bottom center).

Figure 8 - Detailed urban spaces and less mainstream architectural elements
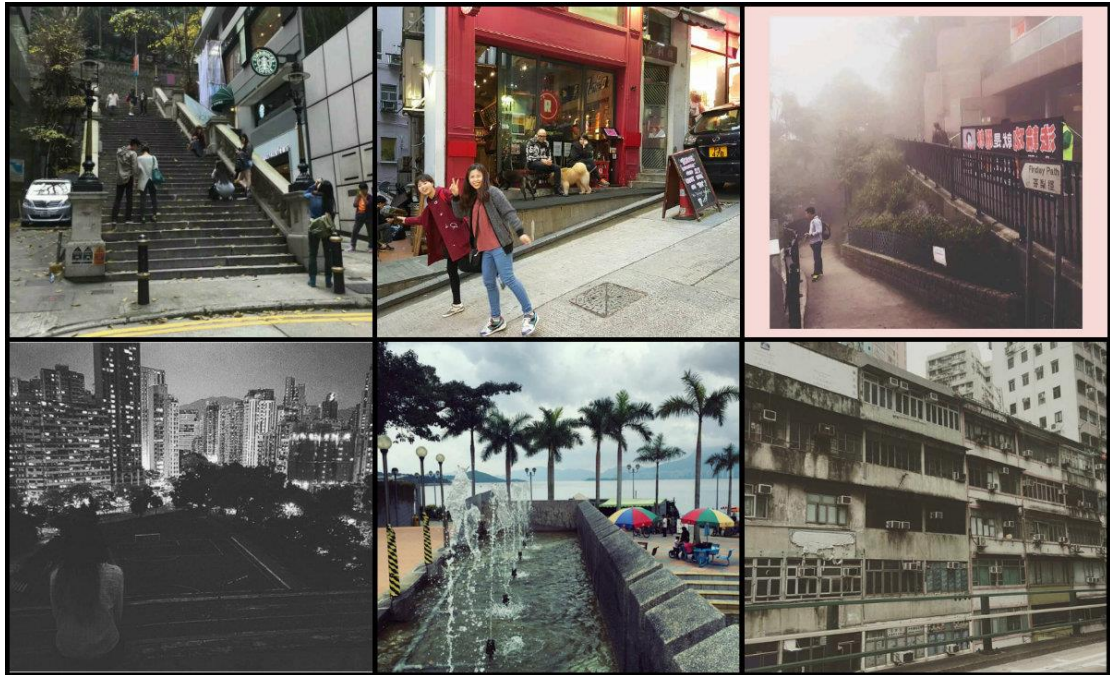
4.1.2.6   People

Most informants submitted photographs of or with other people starting only from the second data collection episode. Photographs that portray people usually include the participants. In the exceptional photographs that portray only other individuals, the photographer focuses on their acts or role. Winning jockeys at the horse races are an example; the elder man writing his wishes on a wall at the Wong Tai Sing Temple on Chinese New Year; the street artist in a Kim Jong-Un costume; the seller of Cheung Chau Island resting under the shadow of a rock. In this category, salience is given to people, by centring them or, in cases where the landscape is used as background, by arranging them in the bottom centre of the frame. The horizontal angle is mostly frontal, the vertical angle at eye-level and the shot medium or close-up. It is unsurprising that many such photographs are "*selfies*" (Agrawal, 2016; Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016), which, differently from what mentioned above, use vertical high angles.

Photographs portraying people place more reliance on the arrangement of gazes. Most are of the demand type, with subjects looking straight into the eye of the camera, thereby forming a connection with the viewer. A connection may be sought between the main subjects and other features, in which case the gaze of the viewer is guided and gestures and gazes serve the purposes of framing. For example, in some photographs where tourists are portraying themselves, they gaze towards the landscape or an installation and away from the camera. They may also give their back to the viewer. In such compositions tourists are both gazing and gazed at (see Figure 9) (Bærenholdt et al., 2004). According to previous research on study abroad discourses, the predominance of posing symbolizes the students' understanding of the experience as touristic (Michelson & Álvarez Valencia, 2016).

Figure 9 - Photographs portraying informants looking away from the camera

From the perspective of expressive content, group photos suggest intimacy, joyous occasions and socialization. Self-portraits, on the other hand, seem to invite the viewer to contemplate through the eye of the subject.

The following comprehensive table (Table 7) summarizes and compares the findings   from   the   preceding   section.

Table 7 - Summary of photographic compositional analysis

	Content	Colour	Spatial Organization	Expressive content
Hong Kong cityscapes	Codes included: night city view; daylight city view; street view; district.	Night city view: high saturation; strong contrast; reduced modulation; hues of the portrayed artificial lights; dominant black or dark grey night sky. Daylight city view: less saturated; brighter; more modulated; dominant hues are grey, white and blue.	Night city view: frontal angle; eye – level; long shot. Daylight city view: higher viewpoints; lookdown vertical angle; long shots	Night city view: sense of a lively and buzzing city; sense of distance and separation of the viewer from the "reality" of the city. Daylight city view: more dramatic effect; suggest depth, height and vastness of the city; perceptions of Hong Kong's topography
Objects	Codes included: statues; dishes; plants; other items.	Varies. Food: less saturation, more brightness, more shading; predominant hues browns and yellows.	Strong framing first, engagement later; information value through centrality; Lookdown vertical angle; close-up; filtering makes it hard to tell the type of light.	Closeness, intimacy, ownership and power over the objects.
Buildings and installations	Codes included: towers; temples; gardens; urban installations.	Varies greatly.	Framing high; information value through centrality; lookup vertical angle; medium shot.	First: Awe, admiration and contemplation. As experience evolves: background to sociality.
Natural Landscapes	Codes included: sea; vegetation; beach; hills; rocks.	Dominated by green and blue hues; saturation varies with filtering; relatively bright and modulated. of the cases almost exactly at the centre	Vertical angle mostly eye-level; long shot; sunlight;	Put the viewer in the position of the photographer through visible elements of the immediate surrounding; peaceful atmosphere; emphasis on pristine and green environment. The viewer is left in contemplation.
Details of Urban	Codes included: café;	Varies greatly, but grey (concrete)	Volumes arrangement: us of	Images stress the contrast between density

Space	flyway; staircases.	dominates as a hue.	perspective lines to connect them, straight, run oblique and across the frame.	and openness of Hong Kong architecture, and the hilly topography of its land.
People	Codes included: self; people – not engaged with; people – engaged with.	Varies	Information value through centrality and combination with other features between top and bottom. Frontal, eye-level angle; Selfies: high angle. Demand; medium shot or close up.	Group photos suggest intimacy, joyous occasions and socialization. Self-portraits invite to contemplation through the subjects' eyes.

4.2   Verbal data analyses

4.2.1   Organizing data in categories through reiteration - descriptive analyses:

The sorting of the data into organizational categories was carried out in a reiterative manner. During data familiarization the researcher was strongly sensitized to the topics highlighted in the conceptual framework. Interview questions operationalized the research question (Evers & Boer, 2012), thereby allowing the researcher to activate narratives about the three main processes under investigation:

(1) Acculturation: negotiations between cultures, the chosen strategy to tackle them and the changes occurred at the individual level;

(2) Relationship with Hong Kong: is manifest through the chosen lifestyle within the destination; the participants' ability to satisfy their needs within the destination's place and society; and congruity between the participants' self-concept and perception of the destination brand;

(3) Ambassadorship: the exchange students' first-person and online communications about the destination in the form of narratives and ambassadorial instruments and modes.

The current study has adopted a constructivist approach, which is premised on the existence of multiple realities. Such realities are constructions, created through the participants' experiences and the social interactions between them and other people in the destination. In addition, interactions with the researcher also contribute to the construction of realities here analyzed (Smith, 2017). Therefore, the researcher took account of categories that emerged empirically throughout the data collection. An inductive approach was employed to do justice to the constructivist approach and to provide a comprehensive coverage of transformation into a brand ambassador.

As a result, the identified categories reflect both the issues of interest to the researcher and purposely investigated through interview questions and probing, and those interactively raised with the participants. The researcher undertook an open coding process as a first step to identifying such organizational categories. These were refined and changed with the analysis of each interview transcription. Subsequently they were fine-tuned to ensure that they were relevant to the research question.

The researcher now summarizes the process of analysis that generated the proposed organizational categories.

Because the study focuses on the process of an individual's transformation into an ambassador, the best way to fracture data into manageable pieces for analysis purposes is by organizational categories that reflect parts of the process. Therefore, the identified categories should also reflect the intention to capture an on-going narrative and the longitudinal and conversational nature of the data collection method. As previously mentioned, Appendix 8.3.3 provides a detailed outline of how the researcher reached the relevant organizational categories.

In Table 8 the researcher provides an overview of the identified organizational categories, their subcategories and the approach through which these categories were populated. If excerpts of interviews were identified as being part of a category based on concepts that the interviewer purposely investigated, then the category would be a deductive category. If the category was identified by what spontaneously emerged from the data, then the category would be an inductive category.

Table 8 - Summary of organizational categories

Category	Subcategories		Type – inductive or deductive
Triggers			
	Activities within Hong Kong		Deductive
		Routines	
		Occasional	
	Travels during the exchange		Inductive
Acculturation			
	Psychological (Stress and coping)		Deductive
	Social		Deductive
	Academic		
	Perceived discrimination		Inductive
Hong Kong Relationship			
	Congruity		Deductive
	Lifestyle		Inductive
Ambassadorship			
	Narrative of Hong Kong		Deductive
	Narrative of Hong Kong Locals		Deductive
	Narrative of Exchange		Inductive
	Narrative of Exchange Students		Inductive
	Narrative of Travels		Deductive
	VFR – accounts of what was shown to VFR		Inductive
Foundations			
	Personal characteristics		Deductive
	Previous Travel Experience		Deductive

Table 8 - Summary of organizational categories

4.2.1.1 Triggers

Much of what participants told the researcher regarding their time in Hong Kong consisted of anecdotes, particularly reports of undertaken activities, of repeated rituals and of casual encounters with and within the destination. These accounts have two main functions within the destination narrative. Firstly, they inform the researcher about how respondents navigate the place, which attractions they visit and which activities they undertake. This information is important to understand the content of ambassadorship for Hong Kong. Secondly, as was discussed in the section of the literature review on acculturation, each encounter within a non-familiar place represents an intercultural contact.

"Triggers" was the first organizational category to be considered in the sequence of the process of turning into destination ambassadors. In this category the researcher collected statements regarding the activities undertaken in Hong Kong such as visiting attractions, shopping, hiking, dining or entertainment. They can also be discerned into subcategories. Some activities were undertaken routinely (for example shopping for Janine, Georgia, and Iris) and some only once or occasionally. The latter activity types usually consisted of visiting sites or engaging in activities that represent iconic things in Hong Kong. Attending horse races, visiting the Victoria Peak or the Big Buddha and going around LKF are illustrations.

Another important element of the activities undertaken by exchange students involve travels to other destinations. Interestingly these were not always Asian destinations. Travel to other countries is a subcategory included within the main category "Triggers" because it represents an important typology of encounters that spark cultural negotiations. As the researcher will explain more thoroughly with regard to narrative analysis, such cultural negotiations are interesting in that they involve not only negotiation between participants'

own original culture and that of the travel destination, but consequently also between these two and Hong Kong's culture. Hong Kong's narrative inevitably becomes intertwined with the thoughts, actions and results of the negotiation between the three cultures.

4.2.1.2   Acculturation

Triggers allow the researcher to consider the modes that are adopted by participants to contact with and become familiar with the destination's culture and its differences with the origin environment. As it is known from the acculturation process, participants consequently experience needs for negotiations and select ways of coping. Therefore, each narrated episode can be related to accounts of perceived stresses and participants' ideas and choices on how to compromise and trade-off cultural aspects. Hence the following organizational category is named "Acculturation" and has as first subcategory "Negotiations". The areas of the exchange students' daily lives that are influenced by these negotiations can be distinguished in subcategories: social, psychological and academic.

Negotiations in the social aspects of life refer to needs for and choices to socialize and build relationships with others in the destination. These subcategories contain information regarding the people participants established relationships with, what they share with these people and what kind of activities they undertook together. The social subcategory collects important pieces of information to understand the construction of the narratives. As will be discussed later, it is not only the navigation of the destination, but also the way narratives are constructed that depend on companions associated with the narrated experiences and on how they are perceived as an audience for storytelling.

The psychological subcategory refers to accounts of what was previously discussed as the stress and coping aspect of the acculturation process. As such, statements in this category collect interview bits where participants state the difficulties that they are facing in Hong Kong and the changes in their personality and everyday life that Hong Kong demands. It also

includes statements about how participants chose to deal with these difficulties and demands (hence the coping aspect of acculturations). The interesting part about this subcategory is that, when observed longitudinally, it allows the researcher to trace the participants' personal growth throughout the experience in the destination.

The academic subcategory was created to separate issues related to acculturating to a new educational system. It was deemed necessary to create an independent subcategory for statements regarding scholastic requirements and ways of coping with them because the educational experience in itself is an important part of the student exchange. Also, experiencing a higher education institution in a destination is what separates leisure tourists from exchange students. In order to make correct use of the information that was gathered, the researcher gives coverage to the relevant issues. These relate to destination narratives and to how the destination can leverage the institutional experience and promote destination ambassadorship using university networks and infrastructure.

Acculturation is a process of change. Change is also the outcome and refers to the acculturating person or group. Hence, another proposed subcategory was "Change" under acculturation. This collects explicit statements of changes occurring at the level of individual participants in the destination as a result of the acculturation process. Once again, the creation of the subcategory allows the identification of points in time and of the kinds of changes impacting on each participant. Later, this will be related to the narrative about the destination experience and the researcher will try to understand how destination narratives are influenced by participants' personal changes.

The acculturation organizational category also includes some interesting and surprising subcategories. For example, participant narratives may also refer to the processes of acculturating themselves to cultural differences within the group of exchange students, in which case such statements were also coded under "Acculturation" and "Negotiations".

Finally, it is worth pointing out one last subcategory of Acculturation, namely that of "Prejudicial Treatment". Participants were often faced with the consequences of their physical appearance, in particular because of socio-cultural perceptions tied to their ethnicities. The subcategory was named "Prejudicial Treatment" and accounts of it point to issues of both received and projected, positive and negative discrimination.

4.2.1.3 Relationship with Hong Kong

Following the processes and the changes of acculturation, participants produced statements about how these made them feel about the destination. Recalling the discussion about brand relationship from the literature review, such statements inform the researcher on the relationship with the destination (where Hong Kong is perceived as a place-brand). The relationship concept is based on the idea that the place is perceived as having a personality, with which the visitor can establish a relationship. The relationship is influenced by the congruity between visitors' self-image and the place; the congruity between visitors' needs and the place's functional and symbolic attributes; and interdependence – the frequency of interactions with the place, consumption rituals and the place being interwoven into the consumer's daily life (Fournier, 1998; Hankinson, 2004). The researcher investigated the perceived congruity between Hong Kong, what it represents to the students and their self-perception. This concept was discussed in the literature review, and is referred to here as congruity. It constitutes one of the organizational categories, and corroborates exchange student perceptions of Hong Kong as a destination and as an emotional place. The perceived congruity between their personality and Hong Kong is not necessarily due to the physical features of the place, but to its feature as a student exchange destination. This will be discussed in the sections below.

 "Congruity" is therefore the first subcategory of the "Relationship with Hong Kong" organizational category. When not discussed spontaneously, the researcher sought statements

regarding congruity between participants own perceptions of their personality and the characteristics and demands of the place; the participants' ability to have their needs satisfied by the destination; and general sentiments towards their life in the destination with the place and the experience.

The second subcategory of "Relationship with Hong Kong" is "Lifestyle". The relevance of the lifestyle that Hong Kong represents for the choice to visit the city and for advocating for the city emerged from the literature. The lifestyle represented by the destination is of course also a means of self-expression for participants (Lesjak et al., 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wragg, 2004). Since lifestyles are difficult to grasp from narratives, the researcher opted for the definition that best suits the ultimate study purpose, namely to investigate ambassadorship. To that end, she followed the principle outlined by Wragg (2004) and sought expressions of the "clear and distinct lifestyle persona" that sets apart Hong Kong visitors from other visitors.

The researcher proceeded to categorize lifestyle responses that describe certain manners of living and a state of mind as ingrained in the Hong Kong experience. The first refers to the way respondents believe there are certain things one should do when living in Hong Kong. For example, conforming to the hustle and bustle of the city and alternating it with extensive hiking and nature experiences; walking at a fast pace and brushing through people; dining in restaurants rather than home cooking. State of mind refers to the overall attitude participants have towards their life in the destination and what it represents in the big scheme of things. A good example is given by the Korean students, who identified Hong Kong as a place of freedom and as the place where to take a break from obligations. Participants' state of mind emerges as relevant in determining the lifestyle that they establish in the destination. Some participants are in a *vacation-with-some-studying* mode, and will engage in more and more diverse activities compared to those that are in an educational mindset and will try to take as

much advantage of the educational experience at the institution. As will be discussed below, mindset influences lifestyle and determines ways of coping and particularly of seeking support. This in turn affects the emphases of the narrative on the Hong Kong experience.

4.2.1.4   Foundations

As participants' entire cycles of interviews were analyzed one at a time, the researcher noticed that statements about the relationship established with Hong Kong in one data collection episode formed a basis for the next. Hence, at each interview episode there was a set of "Foundations" inherited from the previous one. Foundations of the respondent ongoing transformation into an ambassador were identified in the conceptual framework as pre-existing characteristics, but are better described as pre-existing conditions. These were discussed as elements predicting the likelihood of successful acculturation. They include "Personal Characteristics", "Previous Experience" and "Motivation".

In the first data collection episode, statements with regard to these subcategories were factual information easily elicited from participants. Later in the data collection episodes, they had to be read between the lines. Let's take the "Personal Characteristics" subcategory. In this group the researcher gathers information regarding the respondent personality traits and skills that may influence the way they experience the destination. For example, language proficiency and sociality ease the process of acculturation. Yet these aspects are likely to change, more or less significantly, throughout a period of 4 to 5 months. Hence, in coding each data collection episode, the researcher had to return to the previous one to extrapolate these elements from other categories. For example, the statement that during the experience the participant has become more social and less shy is a statement of change for the purpose of the occasion in which the issue is recounted, but works as the foundation of choices in terms of triggers that will be recounted in the following. Statements regarding previous travel experience and motivation work in the same way.

4.2.1.5   Ambassadorship

"Ambassadorship" is the main category and contains instances of narrative about Hong Kong, both spontaneous and activated. The researcher then organized all these statements in sub-categories. These are: "Narrative of Hong Kong", "Narrative of Hong Kong Locals", "Narrative of the Student Exchange", and "Narrative of Exchange Students", "Narrative of Travels" and "Visiting Friends and Relatives - VFR". The subcategory "Narrative of Hong Kong" contains participants' statements about Hong Kong as a city, as a place and destination, both for travel and for study. "Narrative about Hong Kong locals" is the category where all the statements about their encounters with and impressions of Hong Kongers are gathered.

Interestingly, the researcher deemed it as necessary to code transcripts for "Narrative of the student exchange" and "Narrative of the exchange student". The researcher will elaborate later on how accounts of Hong Kong as a place are essentially accounts of a "place in life". The student exchange is in itself a relevant object of narrative, as if the student exchange happened in a temporal vacuum and took place in Hong Kong. Often, as students were required to express their impressions, memories and ideas of Hong Kong, they would respond by referring to the overall exchange experience. In these cases the researcher coded statements in both "Narratives of Hong Kong" and "Narratives of Student Exchange" to take into account such hybridity, the way Hong Kong as a place and the student exchange as a phase intertwine in the sense-making of Hong Kong.

Similarly, "Narrative of exchange students" refer to statements regarding the people that populate the exchange experience, mostly other foreigners. The same way Hong Kongers are seen as the social group idiosyncratic to the place Hong Kong, so exchange students inhabit the student exchange, united by a shared foreignness. Hence participants narrated the student exchange as if it was a space, a place with fixed characteristics and happenings.

When questioned about their experience in Hong Kong, participants often narrated the experience of being an exchange student. A great example of the latter is the narrative of the Korean students. For example, Bart says:

"[…] I really enjoy this time in Hong Kong. […] I appreciate this time, because it's my only time in my life to go traveling, freely, there is no worries and I don't need to take care of my great great [parents] compared to Korea. That's why."

The subcategories "Narrative about Travel" and "Visiting Friends and Relatives" are collections of narratives regarding the trips that the student undertook and their friends and relatives visiting them in Hong Kong respectively. Finally, within the umbrella of the category "Ambassadorship" the researcher created the subcategory "Behavior" referring to factual information about the ambassadorial behaviors discussed with the participants. In this subcategory the reader finds participants statements about the means of communication, the main audiences of communication and, particularly relevant to this study, the intentions the students had in communicating

One other category was created that includes all participants' statements regarding their perception and use of time. The issue of time is often discussed with relation to time availability and in relation to the liminality of the experience. Hence, the researcher coded such statements under the label "Time".

The division in these categories can be represented in a circle which reflects how the data successfully capture the process under investigation. This is circular and self-feeding, as expected in particular with regard to acculturation. But the researcher will elaborate on how such structure is valid with regard to the destination ambassadorship too.

Figure 10 - Organizational categories and their relationships
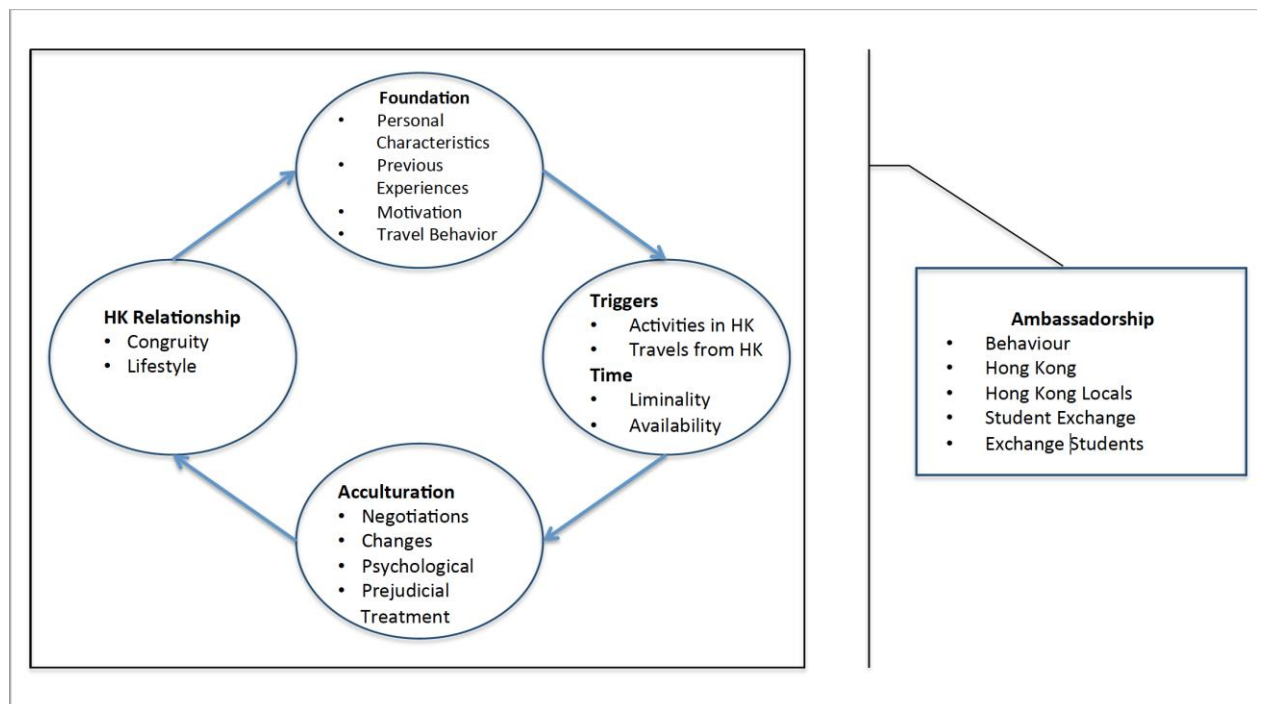
4.2.2   Results from explanatory analysis: narratives

In this section the researcher will illustrate what was evinced from the data through narrative analysis. As explained in the methodology section, narratives were analyzed in their virtue of being socially situated and co-constructed. The yielded results show what participants deemed important to share and the meanings they attributed to the narrated experiences (Smith, 2017).

Narrative analysis of previous research substantiated how the narrative environments and the narrative occasions mediated the content and the emphasis of the story being told. For example, in her investigation on narratives about divorce, Riessman (1990) found that the narrative structures provided ways to persuade both the narrators and their audience that divorce was justified. Similarly, in the current study the researcher focused on the interactional dynamics of the narrated work, to explain how it was constructed, communicated, sustained and reconfigured throughout the stay in the destination. Participants were influenced by their perceptions of the narrative occasions' demands, and constructed the

organization and the meaning of their narratives accordingly. Another influencing factor was the communicators' expectation of how their narratives would operate in the society of reference (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The researcher consistently maintained her focus on both the narratives and their environments, hence engaging in analytic bracketing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). This unearthed the everyday contingencies that shape the way narratives are assembled and communicated.

This was done thanks to the parts of interviews coded under the organizational category "Acculturation" and in particular in the subcategories named "Psychological" and "Social". While the subcategories are not self-explanatory of how the narrative is constructed, they gather important information. In fact, these excerpts of interviews, when analysed in relation with the processes of creating a relationship with Hong Kong and with the way participants communicate about Hong Kong, allowed the researcher to discuss the social situated-ness of the narratives' creation and transmission.

4.2.2.1   The acculturation process in Hong Kong

Narrative analysis was effective in unearthing the process of acculturation in Hong Kong. As expected, the acculturation process varied significantly between participants. Notwithstanding this, the author identified some commonalities. These are discussed below, based on the unfolding of the analytic process. The researcher has previously anticipated how her narrative analysis would also result in a research narrative. Below, the incipience of such research narrative is given. The researcher examines in section 4.2.2.1.1 how the relationship with Hong Kong and the relative acculturation were narrated. In section 4.2.2.1.2 she discusses how the processes relative to acculturating to Hong Kong can be explained through roles. Finally, in section 4.2.2.1.3 she investigates how roles influence destination ambassadorship.

4.2.2.1.1 The ABCs of acculturation in the current study

The literature review has discussed how Ward et al. (2001) have developed a contemporary approach to acculturation that views intercultural contact as a series of encounters and events that cause affective, behavioural and cognitive changes in acculturating individuals. These three types of changes are referred to as the ABCs of acculturation. Based on this literature, the researcher designed a conversation guide for data collection that would allow her to unearth the exchange students' psychological acculturation, which refers to the active coping with the situations experienced when confronted with a different culture and the resulting changes in dimensions such as identity, values, attitudes and behaviours (John W. Berry, 2005; Schmitz, 2005). The research was carried out with a perspective to unearth acculturation as changes that occur for the individual at the affective, behavioural and cognitive levels and to observe the ensuing long-term modification of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (David L. Sam, 2006, p. 21). On the basis of the ABCs acculturation theory, personal characteristics and prior experiences may have affected the way individuals acculturate. As we know from the results of the narrative analysis, those personal characteristics and previous experiences change throughout the stay in HK and they change based on the identity that the student wants to uphold. Hence, one first thing to notice about the acculturation framework in the digital era is that the core characteristics of the acculturating individual changes throughout the acculturation process. This was exemplified by the exchange students' roles. Not only the stimuli and external stressors they are exposed to vary, but also their intrinsic characteristics and motivations.

It was through the identities that the researcher was able to identify and connect the various attitudes, behaviours and cognitive outcomes of the acculturation process in Hong Kong.

In fact, based on the role that they were upholding, students were trying to display a different attitude toward the adjustment to the destination. As exemplified in table 11, for example, respondents in the role of resident students where most likely to display attitudes of diligence and a long-term perspective driven by their academic commitments. Respondents in the role of exchange students, on the other hand, where more likely to display open minded-ness, resilience and independence, while, finally, respondents in their role of tourists would display a thirst for adventure, escape and making the most of their limited time in Hong Kong.

In terms of behaviours, the roles aided the researcher to identify the kind of actions that would be prioritised when upholding them. Similarly to what we have described above for the attitudes, participants that were upholding the resident student role would prioritize studies to maintain a good academic performance, they would prioritize familiarizing with the local students' life and adjusting more deeply to it. Participants in their exchange student role instead would strive to gain insiders' knowledge about the destination and the local culture, would select activities that enhance their personal growth and allows them to create a network. In their role of tourists, participants' behaviour would be geared towards travelling and exploring and making the most of their free time. Finally, the cognitive aspect of acculturation during the experience emerged with the narrative about it. The way respondents made sense of their experience by narrating their stressors and coping mechanisms made up the cognitive component of the acculturation framework. In their role of resident students, the respondents were giving space to negative aspects of acculturation in their narrative. The resident student acculturating individual makes sense of his experience in a very realistic manner, by emphasising long term adaptation and by making sense of negative aspects of life, such as the long bureaucracy of certain processes in Hong Kong, like opening a bank account or dealing with University documentation. The resident student is also the kind of

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acculturating individual that narrates and makes sense of his experiences through routines and habits. These are aspects of life that make him feel "at home", such as having a favourite café or restaurant, having the habit of taking a walk along the seaside at night or even just hanging out with peer exchange students in the student dorms. In their role of exchange student, participants were making sense of their experience in a different manner. The mind-set is curious and adventurous, hence the experience is constructed based on interesting aspects encountered which become learning opportunities. The exchange student is also a pensive individual, looking back at what he has learned thus far and constructing it into an anticipated memory. Finally, the tourist individual would be acculturating to the destination by trying to check off a list the must-sees and must-dos. In this role, acculturation is seen as a series of steps to take, things to see and activities to do that come mostly from the image created prior to the trip about Hong Kong. Exchange students in this role would make sense of their acculturation process by narrating the new things and attractions that they have seen and by narrating what was pleasant and interesting about the destination, rather than what was difficult.

4.2.2.1.2   Acculturation to and relationship with Hong Kong: the narratives

The main element that stood out from the data concerned the evolution of exchange students' acculturative stresses. The current research seemed to confirm previous studies that showed international students' acculturative stresses decreasing with the duration of the sojourn (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Yet, the impact of individual stressors towards the overall perceived stress varied throughout the experience. The researcher found that a singular stressors' impact might actually increase with time. Aspects of the destination that were appreciated at the beginning of the experience, turned, in the long run, into relevant stressors. Participants took time to perceive certain aspects of life in Hong Kong as negative. In addition, participants' coping mechanisms also changed over time and affected the way

they navigated Hong Kong. Hence, to compensate changing stresses exchange students adopted different coping strategies and as a consequence new ways of exploring the city.

Amber provides a good instance of what it means to deal with changing acculturative stresses and the ways these affect the navigation of the destination:

"[…] I really appreciated the city more when I first got here. I don't know, I still like it but I think that it's just that with everything that is going on too it's nice to have more peace and quiet [referring to her hiking activities] with everything being so stressful with the projects. That might be too. Cause now I feel more I want to go into causeway bay cause I haven't been in forever and central, so I think that now that things are winding down I am ready for excitement again." [Fourth interview].

This exchange student reasons about the phases she has experienced during her stay, and how they influenced the places she liked to spend time at. Previously collected experiences are the foundations determining the selected activities at each time during the stay. Such new activities in turn, triggered new acculturation processes and hence new coping mechanisms. As a result, students also renegotiated their relationship with Hong Kong at each stage. This observation allowed the researcher to unearth the connection between the acculturation process and the destination relationship. In the discussion section, the researcher also explains why this is relevant to understand Hong Kong ambassadorship.

Differently from the excerpt presented above, participants were reluctant to voice any complaint or difficulty in the narratives gathered during early interviews. Where they did so, they reduced them to the natural course of settling in a new place, rather than ascribing them to intrinsic characteristics of Hong Kong. Stressors were, for example, getting the transportation card, paying the student accommodation and collecting the student ID. Besides

normal procedures, there were instances of difficulties adjusting to the new education system, the new accommodation arrangements and new tastes.

What is characteristic of the initial phase of the exchange (indicatively the first month) is that participants relate to Hong Kong as a destination to discover, a place they have to give a chance to. Hence, their attitude towards such stressors (collected in the "Psychological" acculturation sub-category) is to make an effort for personal growth. By acculturating to the place with a growth mind-set and with curiosity, participants establish a positive relationship with Hong Kong, which becomes the field where to unleash the most explorative selves. This statement by Amber regarding adjustment to new tastes instantiates participants' attitudes at this stage:

"I want to get used to it [the taste of the local tea], I want to enjoy it sooner or later, so I am forcing myself to..." [second interview – on arrival].

The selected activities also favour such acculturation processes: exchange students join activities organized by the international office on campus; they join in other groups to explore the must-see attractions in Hong Kong; and are seeking novelty.

As the exchange period unfolded, exchange students' biggest sources of stress became the hustle and bustle of the city; pressure from academic commitments; and the lack of physical space (in the accommodation and throughout the city). This meant selecting activities oriented at experiencing natural attractions such as hikes and national parks. Participants' also emphasised an appreciation of places that convey calm, relax and openness. Socialization habits also changed. The beginning of the experience was high time for exchange students to purposely create and join socialization opportunities. It was no surprise that in this phase they prioritized more crowded places. Of course, the fact that they had more opportunities to be among people was also a reflection of discovering the destination for the

first time and visiting the mainstream attractions and sights in Hong Kong. Later on, groups were formed and were more or less solid. Participants had selected their companions and restricted the circle of people they shared their adventures with.

The demands of and attitudes towards acculturation at this point are different. As the experience stabilizes, exchange students become aware of aspects they can and cannot, want and do not want to adjust to. Acculturation in this phase is aimed at ensuring a quiet survival in the destination. Challenges are tackled with tolerance, rather than the struggle for adjustment. In terms of relationship with the destination, that means that the participants establish habits and routines for the sake of a peaceful and for some aspects simply tolerable life in Hong Kong. An example of such attitude can be given through statements regarding social issues faced by students. Nadia, below, explains how she dealt with the relationship with her roommate taking a wrong turn:

"I: how did your relationship with her turned out to be in the end...

N: [laughs] well we are fine... she is super nice with me but we are like... how to say superficial? […] it's easier to be in terms, than to be mad or impolite, there is no point." [fifth interview].

The liminality of the experience calls for shortcuts when certain problems arise, for example, with roommates. Participants find easier ways than they would normally do to make the cohabitation bearable.

Received prejudicial treatment is another aspect of acculturation that changes throughout the experience and that influences the relationship participants build with the place. A notable example of received prejudicial treatments are the accounts of an Afro-American respondent, who narrated the experience of being stared at, taken pictures of and of local people reaching out to touch her hair. Initially, the participant's attitude to such

behaviors was positive and understanding. The participant made the effort to imagine what it felt like to locals, not to have ever seen Afro-Americans before. Surely, though, these narratives pointed to a new and increased perception of how her ethnicity stood out. Being in Asia understandably exacerbated perceptions of ethnical uniqueness. This is more easily understandable when it's considered that, even though famous for being international, Hong Kong still is a city where the great majority of inhabitants are of Chinese ethnicity (88.7% and 95.9% among female and male Hong Kong residents respectively) (CENSTATD, 2016).

While episodes of perceived prejudicial treatment were narrated with an overall tone of acceptance, curiosity and understanding in the initial phases of the exchange, they assumed a less positive connotation towards the middle of the experience. Exacerbation of perceived discrimination in the narratives could be a sign of unsuccessful acculturation due to the host populations' attitude towards the participant's group.

Some students, from Mainland China in particular, anticipated that worry before coming to Hong Kong. Shellie discusses how she feared to experience the same as her classmates who exchanged in Taiwan:

"They said that they had meet many classmates there. They just don't have a right opinion towards the mainland and they kept asking them about some political questions and even though the teachers there they are friendly and try to be friendly to them […] all these little incidents they piled up and just reduce the good impression they had towards Taiwan" (Interview 2)

The collected data suggest that exchange students' tolerance of such behaviors on the part of the host population decreases in the mid and late phases of the exchange. [to read another interview excerpt about this, see appendix]. Such aspects of acculturation progressively become part of the narrative of Hong Kong. Illustrative is the fact that often such episodes are

narrated in response to "What would you tell people about Hong Kong?". The question sought narratives relating to the place per se, but the respondents often answered by recounting human and cultural negotiations. Hence, the acculturation processes become definitional of Hong Kong and are selected because perceived important to be shared with others and memorable, regardless of the fact that they are negative.

Thus, Hong Kong verbal narrative, when analysed through acculturation, points to an acculturation process that fluctuates and changes according to perceptions of success in different facts of life at different times (Brown & Holloway, 2008). This is important because, even though the researcher was able to identify phases throughout the experience whereby the changes occur, the actual denotation that pinpoints such changes is not so much temporal as it is circumstantial, contingent and dependent on each individual. The following section describes it in terms of roles that the participants feel vested in throughout the experience.

4.2.2.1.3   Acculturation strategies across the different roles

As the researcher further probed participants to make sense of changes in their approach to acculturation and in the relationship they established with the destination, she found that their choices were driven by the need to uphold several roles: resident students, tourists and exchange students in Hong Kong.

In carrying out their daily lives in Hong Kong, exchange students are faced with the continuous pressure of the academic, financial and family obligations. Hence, they feel an expectation to pay attention to budget, dedicate a reasonable amount of time to study, pass the academic subjects or even maintain a certain GPA and familiarize with the outlets of the destination necessary to carry out daily activities, for example the bank, the clinic, the supermarkets, etc. They also make clear choices as to what they want and do not want to

acculturate to in order to establish their own way of living the place. These elements suggest that exchange student strive to uphold the role of resident students.

At the same time they are compelled to fulfil the role they are ascribed to based on the purpose of their stay, namely being curious and explorative exchange students. In this role they feel beholden for the opportunity they are given to themselves, to the origin and to the destination countries and institutions. They feel expected to explore Hong Kong high and low, prove to have become knowledgeable about it and keep a learning and growth mind-set towards cultural differences. As exchange students, participants also romanticise the exchange as a juncture in their lives.

The tourist role is prevalent when the students feel as if they are on holiday, free from obligations and entitled to enjoy their time. By virtue of this role, they maintain a relatively carefree and explorative attitude throughout the sojourn and feel an obligation to make the most of their time to travel in Hong Kong.

Participants switch between these roles throughout the experience. Different roles assume importance when making choices in terms of acculturation, destination relationship but also when constructing and transmitting narratives. Hence, roles are essential to understand the contingent meanings of narratives and the circumstances in which they are created and communicated.

Roles may conflict. Participants feel that they should succeed in several areas of life throughout the sojourn, but each one of these areas requires different negotiations of cultural aspects and occurs in diverse contexts. It is no wonder that handling all of them comes at a cost. One of the roles is at time neglected in favour of the other, and, according to which role comes to the fore during a certain period, Hong Kong will be depicted and communicated differently. The fact that participants are hybrids of several roles may support the choice of

certain institutional websites to promote exchange experiences as both a tourist and student experience (Michelson & Álvarez Valencia, 2016). Heather, one of the Korean participants, provides a perfect description of the issue with her own words:

"so I am just worried, a little stressful, but better than Korea, so I just enjoy, I don't study, and I get stressed again. Because I went another place... [because she is not in Korea] so… I wanna go traveling and also I have to get the experience of languages and also I have to study... all the things being good at everything is very difficult." [fourth interview].

In this instance, the participant is aware of the conflict between roles she must uphold. The first sentence exemplifies the alternation of prioritized roles. Worry and a little stress point to the role of resident student, expected to fulfil its academic obligations responsibly. In highlighting that in Hong Kong the perceived stress is "better than Korea" the participant separates the roles, through the geographic situated-ness. Hong Kong is the space for less worry, and therefore as it follows, the participant says "so I just enjoy, I don't study". She refers to her tourist role, to enjoy and take advantage of this time. In Heather's narrative there are also signs of the perceived obligations in her role as exchange student, particularly the expectation that she familiarizes with the English language.

For the current study, it is of particular importance to understand how the roles influence the way students acculturate to, build a relationship with and narrate Hong Kong. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

The resident-student role calls for an integration strategy. In fact, by reason of this role, participants' use of free time and relationship with the destination resembles that of local students. Spending the night in, simply chatting and watching a movie with fellow students in the dorms or playing cards is an example of the resident-student role coming to the fore. Academic obligations and financial struggles emerge and routines and habits enter the

narrative. For example, students' favourite places to get coffee or sit while getting some work done.

At other times, the narrative reflects the felt urgency to make the most of their time in Hong Kong for purposes of personal development. The typical millennial YOLO mantra seems to be guiding them in their role of tourists. Georgia provides an example:

"Because I am in year three and I am going in year four I think maybe every student in every country before they have to think about their future, so I think because I am exchange there in Hong Kong I think every day here is very precious day" (Interview 4).

In their role as exchange students, the educational purpose of the experience is highly relevant. Participant activities and communications are motivated by the need to fulfil such roles and therefore explore as much as possible, learn more about the place and its culture and reason on the teachings of their experience. When the exchange student role is to the fore, the participants appraise the experience as a contribution to their own development. Emphasis is on what they learned, how they changed and the meaning that this period has in relation to their life. In these cases, the chosen acculturation strategies are more of the assimilation and integration type. In fact, managing their impressions of successful exchange students requires demonstrating the effort to learn about, experiment with and immerse themselves in the local culture.

Finally, the tourist role is one of *joie de vivre*, whereby the main participant motivation becomes to ride the wave of freedom and be carefree. The priority is to see and do as much as possible. The checklist approach to the navigation of the destination is prevalent (students have an ideal list of things they want to see and do in Hong Kong and in Asia). In this role the need to adjust to the local culture is felt less strongly. Participant activities are oriented towards enjoyment, relaxation and leisure rather than towards a purposeful effort to integrate

to the local culture. The acculturation strategy needed for this is more of the separation and assimilation types. In fact, participants in this mind-set make the minimal effort towards accommodating the local culture, place more importance on their preferred companionship and the sharing of the experience with similar others.

Table 9 proposed below helps the reader to visualize the implications of each role. For that purpose the researcher described each role based on the associated personality that the exchange students think has to be upheld, and the things the exchange students need to do to fulfil the respective role. This representation also serves the purpose of understanding why narratives are composed in certain ways when a certain role is to the fore, based on the principle that narratives are also a process of identity construction.

Table 9 - Personalities attributable to roles and actions undertaken to fulfil role-related obligations.

	Resident student	Exchange Student	Tourist
Personality	Diligent; Hard working; Thoughtful.	Curious; Explorative; Open-minded; Accommodating; Sociable; Resilient.	Carefree; Active; Makes the most of the time; Hasty.
Fulfillment	Prioritization of the studies to maintain a good academic performance; Familiarizing with the local students' life; Adjusting to the local every day's life.	Gaining insiders' knowledge about the destination and the local culture; Dedication to personal growth; Creation of a social network;	Produce proof of traveling (photographs, checklists); Identifying differences with home country; Showing overall positive judgement of the destination.

4.2.2.1.4 Destination relationship across different roles

The fact that the narratives of Hong Kong of single individuals appeared differently through the experience proves that "it is often more important to look for secondary messages, such as moral values or cultural beliefs, than it is to track down whether the story

is literally true" (Riessman, 2008). By using the acculturation framework to analyse the interviews the researcher could, in section 4.2.2.1.2, shed light on how acculturative stresses and coping strategies changed. By analysing the same narratives from the point of view of the relationship with the destination, she could explain how Hong Kong served the participants in fulfilling their roles and the related identities. The latter is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Prior to commencing their student exchange, participants try to respond to the expectations cast on resident students in their origin country. In fact, the narrative around their expectations of Hong Kong and the anticipated acculturative negotiations are built around the need to come across as conscientious students whose motivations are career oriented and who are diligently preparing for the exchange.

There is also anticipation of what is involved in being a good exchange student. In this role, participants narrate their expectations about Hong Kong and their time preparing for it by building their identity as resilient, culturally sensitive and accommodating exchange students. When asked about what they intended to do at the destination, participants clearly provided projected images of themselves and of the experience that combined the role of resident students to that of future exchange student. Examples will be provided in the following section 4.2.2.2 on the ambassador formation process.

At the start of their stay (investigated through the second and third interviews), participants perceived the tourist role as being prevalent, and negotiated it with an emergent exchange student role. Hence the first month in the destination produces narratives that refer to freedom, exploration, relaxation and socialization. Respondents seem to think that freedom typifies the mind-set of all their peers at in this period, which makes them come together and feel united. In the words of Bart

"I think for all the exchange students every day is weekend because you don't really need to worry about. They only take care of their stomach" [third interview].

Similarly, Ronald "Cause for us our mind-set it's like we are just really comfortable here, there is nothing to really worry about. Go to school, and enjoy what we have. […] We have a lot of freedom here." [third interview].

Freedom is also used to refer to time availability. At the beginning of the semester the academic obligations are not pressing yet. In particular, the add/drop period is a time for exchange students to take it easy and concentrate on explicating their role of tourists visiting attractions of the city, and socializing with other exchange students to secure a social group.

Navigation of Hong Kong is often motivated by the image previously established in the participants' mind, or encouraged by the host institution. Because participants prioritize socialization in this phase, they may also tag along fellow exchange students and join university-organized tours. Therefore, the relationship with Hong Kong during the initial phases is of exploration, curiosity and getting to know new people and places. At the same time, mindful of the purpose of the whole stay, participants start upholding their role as exchange students, particularly with reference to acculturation.

As the experience advances, the role of exchange student acquires prominence. By the third interview, (after the first month of exchange), participants have secured relationships that they will maintain for most of the exchange. In addition, after the initial part of the semester, the academic obligations affect their schedules and so the use and availability of free time. Hence the destination relationship is built, like the student exchange itself, through a balance between freedom and obligations, novelty and routine.

Cognizant of the length and temporary nature of their stay, participants work towards defining this as a special time in their lives. To that end, they characterize it by both

establishing a basis of habits and rituals in Hong Kong, as well as by enriching it with a number of activities and attractions. In fact, towards the first month of the experience (starting from the third interview) there are signs of hybrid perceptions of time and negotiations of roles. Exchange students still feel like they have to use all of their free time, because "*doing nothing feels like a waste*" [Amber, third interview]. This perception is tightly related to the tourist role and the need to show (to themselves and to others) that they are up and about exploring and learning about Hong Kong. On the other hand, there are more and more narratives about the "*we*" and the "*usually*". That is to say, by the end of the first month in the destination, exchange students start feeling more familiar with Hong Kong. They identify with their group of reference of other exchange students, and start integrating in the narrative of Hong Kong the habits and routines that they have established.

The final phase of the exchange emerges mostly from the fourth and fifth interviews. The main observation concerning these narratives is the much more relaxed expression of negative aspects of the destination and the experience. Towards the end of the experience the Hong Kong narratives make space for negative aspects of the place, such as crowding, pollution, high residential prices, lack of personal space and even narratives of the Hong Kong locals such as rude, exemplified by things like pushing their way on the streets and the MTR, the refuse to speak English or serve foreigners on the hand of taxi drivers, or even local students not speaking English in the presence of exchange students. Bart provides an example in the fourth interview:

"Because they are always late and they never take other students into account. They always use Cantonese, but they always ask us to join the event or functions. […] and they told each other only with local students in Cantonese and I just feel out of it and I feel isolated from them. If you treat me like that why they invite me and then after these things again and again... I feel disappointed."

The liberty to express negative feelings about the destination and the local people is evidence of the participants' assumption of the role of resident student. In fact, as this role comes to the fore, participants feel more knowledgeable about the destination but also share more realistic opinions. As the exchange student role passes in the background, there is also no longer the need to uphold an image of positivity. Participants have decided what they want and do not want to acculturate to, and, for some challenging aspects, they simply try to make their stay as peaceful and tolerable as possible. The relationship with Hong Kong is closer to that established with a destination of residence: it serves participants as a theatre to their newly established life and it is viewed and experienced in a less *starry-eyed* manner.

Thanks to the fact that exchange students rotate between the tourist, the exchange student and the resident student roles, their attitudes to using their free time are optimal. The tourist role puts students into the mind-set of doing as much as possible in the exchange period. This attitude leads them to visit places quickly and go to attractions they want to check off a to-see list. On the other hand, the exchanges students' role, with its prioritization of social relationships and of learning, encourages participants to linger in the destination and *slows down* their exploration of Hong Kong. Finally, their role as resident students faces them with the challenges but also the habits and the routines of the locals. This means sometimes forgetting about the liminality of the experience to take care of more urgent matters, such as academic commitments, future career planning and financial concerns. The latter issues require students to slow down and put them in the mind-set that Hong Kong is home, and like home there are less pleasurable things to take care first. To the point that one of the participants, towards the end of the experience, relates the best memories of her stay exactly to the obligations that are normally attributed to local students:

"Well, in Hong Kong I think there are two types of memories. One memory is spend in the hall and join activities, maybe it's carnival, maybe it's a new dinner party. The other kind of memory is staying in University and studying all the time." [Sharon, fifth interview].

It is interesting how towards the end of the experience participants are cognizant of how the place can serve to the fulfilment of different roles.

Notable to this end are statements regarding whether they would recommend Hong Kong as a place to live in or as a place to travel to. This awareness is instantiated in the following statement released by Nadia:

"[…] But I am glad I came for exchange here cause I think I might have said at the beginning, this is not a place you go for a holiday, or you don't think oh I am gonna go to HK. So it's a great way to experience this place and Asia as well." [fifth interview]

Participants were able to reason on the evolution of their roles and on how these affected the way they navigated the destination. Exemplary is the discussion carried out with Ronald at the fifth interview with him:

"[…] when you first come here it's like you just wanna get on the train and go everywhere and explore different things... and towards the second half it was more like having the freedom of being in a different country and during the second half you get close to certain people so it's about friendships, and being with them, pretty much every single day, because we live in the same place so we could meet every single day".

To conclude this discussion on the evolving relationship with Hong Kong based on the different roles, it can be said that the city served in new ways towards the participants' self-concept and new lifestyles were established to fulfil their perceived role.

4.2.2.2   The ambassador formation process

As discussed in the methodology, narrative is used in this study for two purposes: as a data source and as a strategy for presenting the findings. Previously it was mentioned how the research would generate a narrative. Therefore, the researcher developed an account of the findings organized narratively, hence in a sequenced manner, whereby there are specific characters and settings rather than disconnected bits of information collected through several interviews (Riessman, 2008). The researcher organizes the findings chronologically and presents the Hong Kong narrative provided by her study's participants at the various interview episodes.

4.2.2.2.1   Prior to Departure

Prior to the experience, participants' familiarity with the reality of Hong Kong was limited. Their knowledge of the place emerged as superficial, to their own admission, and based mostly on online searches and information received by hearsay.

Both Asian and Western students mentioned how they believed Hong Kong is a safe choice from the point of view of cultural distance. In particular, it was narrated as a place that blends western and Asian cultures. Participants of both origins expect that this blend will diminish the difficulties of intercultural contact:

"Just on the one hand it's very international and I think in comparison with other foreign countries just like England or Paris, I think Hong Kong may be more close to our Mainland." [Georgia, first interview].

"You still get a small piece of China, but it's still easier than going to Mainland China" [Iris, first interview].

This image of Hong Kong also came with the assumption that English would be widely spoken across Hong Kong, hence facilitating communication. Yet, this point would be later

contradicted by participant first-hand experiences and was discovered as a main obstacle to acculturation, both for the Asian and non-Asian exchange students.

Students saw Hong Kong as international and finance-centred. In fact, many of the respondents saw the destination functionally, as a useful platform to possibly develop some experience useful for their future careers. Whether that was coming back for a curriculum related internship or, as Nadia mentions, simply because

"[…] it will look good on the CV that I have done my exchange in Hong Kong" [first interview].

Many of the narratives prior departure confirmed Hong Kong's organic image as promoted by its tourism board as it is exemplified below:

"All I know about is limited to its good reputation as a famous country, good for traveling and its economy." [Shellie, first interview].

"Very international, different cultures, a bit like East meets West, skyscrapers, very nice weather all year round. A lot of stores, shops." [Jasper, first interview]

"[…] the food is amazing. It's busy. Everyone says that you have to walk really fast. The shopping will be cheap." [Janine]

"[…] it's a biiig city, with huge buildings and a lot of food" [Nadia]

To conclude, overall in the phase prior to departure the students viewed Hong Kong as a busy and big international city, with a thriving economy (hence a focus on finance and shopping), with a lot of ethnic food and with a convenient mix of western and eastern cultures.

4.2.2.2.2   Upon Arrival: the first weeks

Brown and Holloway (2008) found that most exchange students experienced at least some degree of culture shock in the first few weeks of their one year stay. This was lamented often as a sense of disorientation (confusion) or of anxiety related to day-to-day activities (Storti, 1990). Brown and Holloway (2008) found that students mostly feared being incompetent about what is culturally acceptable in the host country and about their linguistic proficiency, besides all being anxious about the academic hurdles. These difficulties were coupled with feelings of homesickness and loneliness, both often reduced by friendship networks, in particular with co-nationals.

In this study the very first interview confirmed that the main area in which acculturation was needed concerned processes of day-to-day life. The related activities created the contexts to discover the very first impressions of Hong Kong. Running errands to get settled in the dorms, in the University and with transportation are notable examples. By carrying out these activities exchange students have the first encounters with Hong Kong and its people. All the participants agreed on the fact that Hong Kong is crowded, fast paced and convenient. This is not far from what was expected before arrival, and confirms the organic image of Hong Kong. Below are some examples of what exchange students said of Hong Kong as they first arrived in the destination:

 "so crowded! Really crowded! […] Also people here walk so fast!" [Charlotte]

"It's really fast-paced as well, really fast-paced, everyone is getting somewhere" [Janine]

"It's really nice cause everything is close by you don't have to travel a lot, you get the supermarket just around the corner and everywhere you know it's just very convenient... and

you can eat everywhere, pretty much every street there is at least one restaurant so... It's mostly convenience actually." [Jasper]

"That's what I like here, you can just kinda walk to things." [Ronald]

Because exchange students are new to the destination and in many cases new to living by themselves in a new country, their ambassadorship of Hong Kong at the very beginning of the experience consists in great part in pointing out differences with the home environment. The most notable example is that of the Chinese students who all notice and narrate Hong Kong based on the schedule of the daily life (wake up and meal time) and of the facilities in which they live (more modern and convenient but less spacious than at home). Everyone notices issues related to the use of the English language, and most of the respondents seem to agree that English is not as widely spoken as they had hoped. Food also represents one of the most often mentioned topics when recounting Hong Kong. Surprisingly, the respondents that seemed to have more problems adjusting to the local food are the Chinese and Korean students, while the western students display a communication about food in Hong Kong based on the exchange students' role prioritization of learning experiences and appreciation of differences. Western students are also intrigued by the differences in dining habits such as the fact that patrons often share their table with strangers.

"[…] if you go to restaurants they put you in a table with people that you don't know before, that would not happen in Finland. I like it; I think that is quite nice" [Iris, second interview].

Hong Kong is depicted as a city that involves a lot of walking, unexpectedly, given that it is famous for being very well connected through public transportation. But exchange students are faced with the need to walk long footbridges or through very big stations.

"The first three days my feet were really sore, from walking, because you have to walk everywhere here... a lot!" [Janine, second interview]

"I was actually amazed by the amount of distance that I have to walk each day, like how much walking, just like exploring and walking around" [Jasper, second interview]

Hence, the narrative is built in this phase based on the immediate impact that the destination has on its visitors, namely being crowded, fast paced and international. Exchange students also recount aspects of life in Hong Kong that they foresee they will have to adapt to, like dining, walking and communicating in English. Differences with life in their home country are also prevalent in the Hong Kong narrative at this point.

4.2.2.2.3 Middle of the exchange

During the middle of the exchange period, students start to be curious about travel outside Hong Kong. They not only travel to other destinations but also explore less mainstream attractions and sights within Hong Kong. In this period participants are less concerned with trying to conform to the expectations put on exchange students, and celebrate the opportunity to travel and explore as the liminality of their stay assumes a central role.

As previously mentioned, exchange students progressively accept aspects of culture and lifestyle in the destination that they could not adapt to, to which they have chosen a separation acculturation strategy. They acknowledge such aspects as definitional of the destination Hong Kong but the pressure to demonstrate ability to accommodate them is off their shoulders. These aspects are therefore narrated more realistically and negative consequences on how their persona will be judged are felt less strongly.

The main negative aspects spoken about are definitely crowding and the hustle and bustle of the city. While these were portrayed as fascinating at the beginning of the experience (a response of seeking congruity between the explorative exchange student and the destination) they are now often discussed as negative aspects of life in the destination. Students, when encouraged to account for how they would explain Hong Kong to others,

often bring up the issue of bad service and snappiness of Hong Kong locals. The same goes for bureaucracy and the lack of English skills by many service industry workers.

At the same time, where there are negotiations of cultural aspects still occurring, the mantras dominating students' attitude are YOLO and FOMO (as explained in the introduction, these refer respectively to making the most of their time in Hong Kong and fearing to miss out). Closer to the fourth data collection episode, these will come in conflict with the academic obligations, and with the incipience of a growing resident-student role.

When the exchange students' perceived role of traveller comes to the fore, their need for congruity with the destination and for ego enhancement makes it so that the narrative about Hong Kong comes across as the depiction of an emotional place. Hong Kong is a place in life. It represents the space for the participants to take advantage of opportunities and to be "yes people". Often, exchange students when asked to describe Hong Kong the way they would recount it to others, define it as a holiday or a special time in their life. The perception of Hong Kong as a place brand name is therefore deeply intertwined with the mental representation of what this time is in their life story.

4.2.2.2.4 Last days in the destination

In the days before departure the main issue for participants regards how to make the best of the remaining time and deal with the anticipated stresses of the return home. The fact that the experience was drawing to an end also brought participants to check the boxes and arrange occasions to farewell their friends. At the same time, the need to romanticize the anticipated memory of the experience starts to emerge and, while cognizant about the negative elements of Hong Kong, participants advance an overall positive image of the place. The main point in these phases is to highlight the contrasts of the city, between business and culture, urban architecture and nature, work and leisure.

The memorialization of the experience has two interesting consequences. Firstly, the depiction of Hong Kong as an emotional place is reinforced. Hong Kong assumes both a temporal and geographical connotation, as the name Hong Kong is used to refer not only to the city, in its virtue of location, place or destination, but also in its virtue of student exchange, of life-time, of experience. The narrative of Hong Kong becomes a blend of factual and emotional accounts of the whole life in Hong Kong. Secondly, through memorialization of the experience, the participants also reason on how their perceptions of life in Hong Kong have evolved throughout their stay. This means that the researcher was able to trace such changes not only thanks to the longitudinal data collection, but also through the participants' own accounts of these changes. These were given in particular in the last three data collection episodes, with most of them to be found during the 5th data collection episode, one week before departure. Here is an instance from a conversation with Janine:

"Probably the best time it was at the beginning of the exchange I think, just going to new places, and just finding new places I guess, meeting new people and it was fun. I think just the fact that everything was so new I really liked, but like now that I am used to it it's not that I am not enjoying it, but it was more fun exploring it than I guess knowing everything now." [Janine, fifth interview]

As it was previously discussed with regard to liminality and exchange students' propensity to appreciate the destination more than other visitors would, by the end of the experience certain specific positive aspects of the destination stand out. By anticipating the return home, exchange students seem to emphasize what they won't be able to find anymore that they appreciated in Hong Kong. Like Jasper says:

"The weather, the campus is so much better, the teachers are more like everyone is so nice, the food is nice, there is so much to do. In my small village is so inconvenient, you have

to go to the city, and here is like close, everything is conveniently close together. Good transportation, I would say perfect. […] So sad to leave." [Jasper, fourth interview].

Finally, in this phase participants emphasize the quality of "time of their life" that the experience has been. Now participants prepare themselves to go back to their obligations, to normal life. In the words of Georgia, "to face reality" [fifth interview].

The fifth interviews were particularly useful to the researcher to corroborate the narratives constructed up to that point. They were also an occasion for the researcher to evaluate the cognizance participants had of what they lived, what they said about their experience and how they felt about their evolutions throughout their stay. By the end of the experience the participants seem pretty aware of the evolution of their social relationships in the destination and how these may have affected their experience in Hong Kong.

"[…] Just would be better if I knew more locals now... at first you are so lost, and then you are just hanging out with exchange students […]" [Nadia, fifth interview].

"[…] it's very important because in the beginning of the semester, all the students like to – [they are] excited to make new friends but after one month, you feel lose some timing I think. It's very hard to make friends because they already have a group. The first [month] is very important for them so I recommend that they have to make friends." [Bart, fifth interview]

4.2.2.2.5   Back home: recollection

As participants are back in their familiar environments, the Hong Kong narrative is becoming fixed. It is clear that the content of the narrative and its tone resemble what emerged in the last interview before departure, with fine-tuning that resulted from social interactions with the origin's culture social networks and by comparison with the home environment.

Upon return it seems that the prevalence of perceiving themselves in their role of exchange students is back. Participants' social construction of accounts is informed by the need to prove that the outcomes of the exchange were achieved. They feel obligated to provide their peers in the origin environment and home institutions with evidence of successful acculturation and improvements in their personality. Hence exchange students advance an overall positive description of Hong Kong. They discuss the ways living in the destination has made them grow and change. They reason on their selves throughout the experience and identify and depict Hong Kong as the emotional place in their lives where transformations occurred, opportunities were taken and memories of self and place were created. Participants share perceptions of how they have become more mature than the peers at home, more self-confident, spontaneous and open-minded. Improvements in the latter aspects of personality allowed participants to become "more themselves" rather than to become different persons, which is in line with findings in previous research (Dettweiler et al., 2015, p. 81).

It is also a time in which they are expected to advance their knowledge about the place, and talk insider information. The narrative about Hong Kong is negotiated through comparison with the home environment and anticipated memory of this time in life. Interestingly, comparison with the home environment was the automatic thought process when asked "What do you think is unique about Hong Kong?". To fulfil their role of exchange students, participants share special information about the place, local insights and special anecdotes. Therefore narrative of Hong Kong in this phase is probably the most interesting because it conveys positivity and less-mainstream content, potentially contributing to a much better informed organic image of Hong Kong. Part of narrating Hong Kong from an insiders' point of view is to mention the duality of the city, in particular that between the busy city and the quiet nature. Shellie puts it into nice words:

"It's quite a great experience if you walk along the streets in Hong Kong at night to feel the rich night life in Hong Kong, yes. And also, if you want to travel to Hong Kong, don't forget about those lovely mountains that's far away from the city. […] Many tourists, they don't know that Hong Kong has that silence aspect compared with its noisy city and prosperous life." [Sixth interview].

This is the phase in which narrative about Hong Kong becomes fixed, as it resembles the accounts collected upon departure. It turns into more of a story rather than a continuously negotiated narrative. There will always be the social situated-ness of the audience when advancing communication about Hong Kong. But the social negotiation that brought to the construction of the narrative is in the past, and becomes fixed in the students' memory.

Differently from what was found by Christofi and Thompson (2007) with regard to international students, exchange students in this study do not seem to have dramatic experiences of their return home, or at least not at the moment of interviewing after the return home. Yet, when questioned about their process of settling back into life in their home country, participants do discuss some difficulties they faced. In terms of ambassadorship for Hong Kong this may have positive or negative connotations depending on what are the major issues for the particular student and the main differences between life in Hong Kong and life in the student's homeland. For example, for Mainland Chinese students going back to the student accommodation in China represents a challenge, since in Hong Kong the arrangements were much more favourable. On the other hand, students from other countries are more likely to be enjoying a bigger space upon return home.

4.3   Triangulation of visual and verbal data

In line with this study approach, the researcher here uses triangulation to emphasise that the reality she examines is contextual and takes into account contingencies. Triangulation is here used for the purposes defined by Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Liao (2004) to use "more

than one approach to the investigation of a research question in order to enhance confidence in the ensuing findings". Hence, the investigation of the phenomenon through interviews aimed at capturing verbal narrative in combination with the collection of photographs to capture visual narrative served here the purpose of gaining a good understanding from different perspectives. In the following paragraphs the researcher discusses how the analysis of verbal and visual narratives together provides a better understanding of the evolution of exchange students into destination brand ambassadors.

In the following section the researcher discusses the narrative analysis that combines the visual and verbal narratives. The pictures were organized by participants and then by data collection episodes. Following this approach, matrices were used to organize the coding of the interview excerpts. One matrix was completed for each respondent, collecting statements regarding identified organizational categories through each data collection episode. The use of Nvivo facilitated the sorting of the verbal data into matrices. The fact that evidence from both visual and verbal data was sorted by data collection episode facilitated the compiling of narratives that encompass the entire experience. The researcher subsequently prepared these data in timelines that allow a better visualization of the findings (as can be seen in Figure 11). This allowed her to navigate data relating to Hong Kong ambassadorship in chronological order, and to zoom in and out on the different phases, categories and images. In addition, the timeline tool allowed for a more accessible and friendlier combination of the visual and the verbal data. By doing so the researcher successfully focused on the sequential and structural features of the narratives as prescribed by the narrative analysis method (Riessman, 2008). [To view an example of how the timeline tool was used to display the data and the images chronologically, click here].

Below the researcher offers a static view of the interactive timeline through photograph:

Figure 11 – Example of a timeline that displays data visually and chronologically
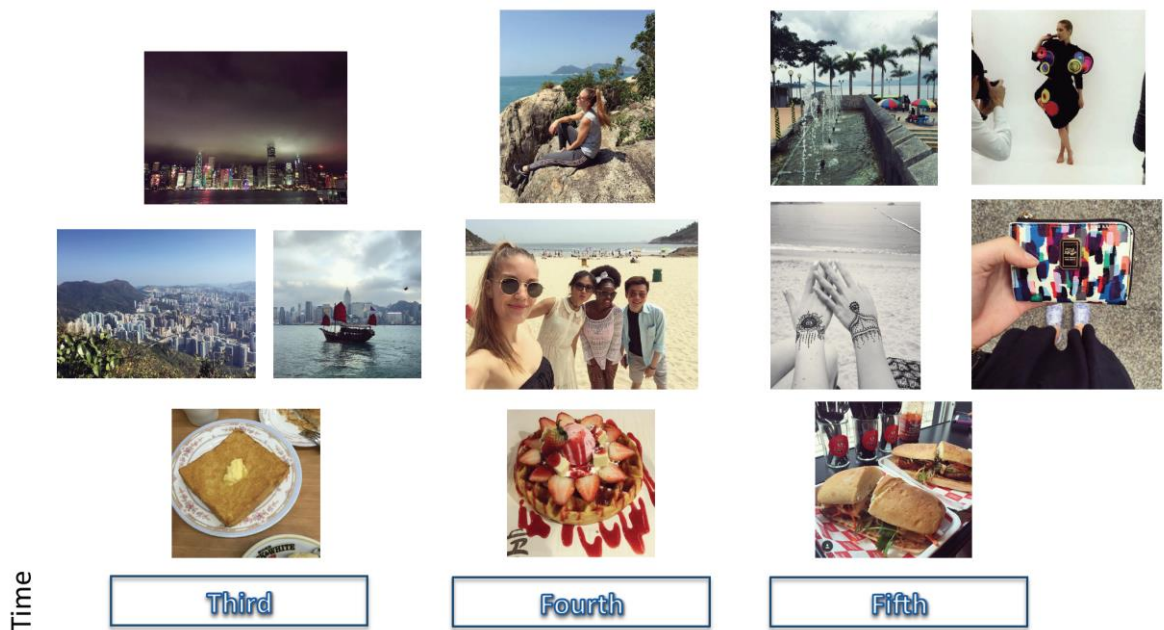

Figure 12 - Zoom in on the Timegraphics software used to triangulate verbal and visual data. The image represents data collected in Feb 2016

Verbal narratives of Hong Kong as seen in section 4.2.2.2.2 uncover that at the beginning of the experience Hong Kong is recounted as crowded, fast paced and international. The previous visual analysis of photographs of Hong Kong evidenced that in the same phase students tended to emphasise cityscapes, in particular glitzy views of skyscrapers (such as the view of Hong Kong city from Victoria Peak or night pictures from Victoria Harbour). It was also discussed how compositionally these images place a dramatic emphasis on height, depth and vastness. Hence both the visual and verbal narratives accentuate the exchange students' perception of Hong Kong as a mega city and a lively destination. Verbal narrative in this phase also regarded aspects of Hong Kong that caught students' attention by virtue of being novel to them. Once again, there was correspondence between the verbal narrative and the visual narrative, visible in the photographs that focused on particular objects encountered in the destination that captured exchange students' attention. The objects and the cityscapes are archetypal of what is prioritized as worth recounting in the initial phase.

Amber provides a good example: the first photographs that she submitted for the study include a photo of Buddha statues and one of panda-shaped buns she found at a bakery. Sharon shared a photo of piles of magazines stacked by stands at the sides of the streets. Janine, Charlotte and Nadia shared photos of the meals they tried at local restaurants and food stands that represent to them the local cuisine and new dining experiences. Iris chose a close-up picture of locks at a gate in Cheung Chau. There seems to be a correspondence between the depicted objects and the students' gaze over the destination. Images of objects are accompanied by a verbal narrative in which participants' recount the pleasure of encountering new things and how the objects embed the exoticness of the local culture. Verbal narrative of the initial phase of the exchange focuses on discovery, on the exploration of the destination by visiting its main attractions and by exploring it high and low while

carrying out daily chores. Hence the combined narrative in the initial phase serves the exchange student role, expected to be explorative and have a keen eye for details of the local reality. Participants felt expected to account for elements of the destination that are representative and iconic, as well as for elements that are exotic and not easily accessible unless living in the destination.

Therefore, it can be said that verbal and visual narrative of the initial phase of the student exchange combine mundane objects of the day-to-day life in Hong Kong with grand and famous sights of the city.

The middle part of the experience is represented by the second batch of photographs collected from students and by the fourth interview. Both photographs and verbal narratives point to the growing importance of travel outside Hong Kong and of comparison of Hong Kong with the newly visited destinations. Also, the narrative about Hong Kong points to exchange students navigating less mainstream attractions and sights within Hong Kong and to a more familiar and independent outlook on the destination. In fact, while initially students' gazed Hong Kong based on the organic image, the second batch of photos and the places visited point to a much more differentiated and spread out navigation.

To that end the researcher also traced all the sites and attractions that her interviewees narrated about by creating one map per respondent. This could be done by using the *Google My Maps* tool. The researcher then proceeded by merging each individual participant's map into a single one. By creating layers corresponding to the phases of the exchange, the user can interactively visualize the map by phase and get an overview of how the navigation of Hong Kong progressed over time. At the same time the user can see what were the most visited parts of the city. [For a comprehensive view of all the participants' maps, click here. For the detail of the individual participants' maps see appendix 8.5].

In the middle phase of the exchange, participants are less concerned with trying to uphold the role of good exchange students, and are more focused on trying to *carpe diem* while juggling the fast approaching academic deadlines and the mounting worries intrinsic to the resident-student role. In line with the latter, photographs of objects have a new purpose: while in the previous phase they captured the eye-catching novelty of the destination and served the role of the good exchange students, in this phase they symbolize habits and rituals established in the destination, which refer rather to the resident student role. In this sense the photographs of objects also serve the purpose of recounting Hong Kong as an emotional place by representing the ways participants have made the experience their own. For example, Bart selected the photo of a painting that he saw at Art Central (a major art exhibition in Hong Kong). While the object is not representative of Hong Kong as a city, the photo evoked some strong emotional response in him and represents an emotional episode tied to the participants' idea of Hong Kong. As previously explained, it is in this phase that the researcher finds that the mental representation of Hong Kong as a phase in life is ingrained in Hong Kong's place brand name.

In this phase the verbal narrative also makes space for negative aspects of the destination and unsuccessful acculturations. A typical example refers to the busyness of the city. Visually, this is evident because there are barely any photos of the cityscape in this phase, and instead there is much more space for images of green, pristine and quiet places of Hong Kong. Hence, the ambassadorship of Hong Kong in this phase both visually and verbally emphasises the parts of the city that compensate for the negative aspects.

The final phase of the experience is narrated in the participants' third batch of photographs and fifth interview, which occurred right before their departure from Hong Kong. One of the verbal narrative's aspects that dominated in this phase was the urge to make the best of the remaining time. As confirmed visually, participants' connected this with

spending time with the friends they made in Hong Kong. In fact, photos of participants with their friends are predominant. Verbal and visual narratives in this phase also suggest closure. For example, Georgia's photograph of different objects of her da-to-day life such as assignments, octopus card, cinema tickets, is presented in black and white, in a white frame through a purposeful arrangement on a desk. Compositionally, these photos advance a romantic visual impact, through the use of black and white, close-up shots and volumes' arrangement. Participants weigh the value of the experience drawing to an end, hence co-constructing with the researcher the anticipated memory of Hong Kong.

The return home also means that exchange students will be accountable for relating their experience to others. While still in the destination, exchange students are already anticipating how they will play the role of good exchange students once back home, and hence construct an appropriate narrative of Hong Kong. In this phase participants' willingness to attribute an emotional meaning to Hong Kong is at its highest. In the following chapter the researcher discusses the implications of the results of her study, particularly contemplating how the results address the initial research questions. Finally, the researcher will examine unexpected and collateral findings from the study that have implications for tourism scholars and practitioners.

5   Discussion

In the following chapter the researcher discusses implications arising from the study findings, and provides evidence to address the research question and objectives. In line with the chosen methodology, the researcher starts by discussing the implications of the composition of the respondent photographs for their process of becoming ambassadors.

5.1   The communicative power of visual composition

This study used compositional analysis to investigate the visual narratives of Hong Kong shared by exchange students. The researcher identified categories by grouping photographs with common compositional elements, both content and form. Photographs within the same category constitute typologies of visual discourse about Hong Kong that suggest similar expressive effects (Riessman, 2008). In the initial phase of the experience, the predominance of photographs of Hong Kong cityscapes and their composition is consistent with the hermeneutic circle of the tourist gaze (Jenkins, 2003; Michaelidou et al., 2013). The anticipation created by the projection of Hong Kong's brand as *Asia's World City* are substantiated through exchange student visual narratives. Such anticipations concern the townscapes and novel sensorial experiences that merit particular attention (Urry, 1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011). They are expressed in photographs through content and composition respectively.

The composition of photographs of the night skyline evokes affective responses portraying the city as glossy and eventful. This is achieved through high saturation, a variety of hues and strong contrasts. The characteristic long distance shots suggest a big city setting and emphasise the insular topography of Hong Kong by giving space to reflections of the skyline in the water. Similarly, photographs from high viewpoints that portray the daylight cityscape emphasise a synecdochical attribute of Hong Kong: tall buildings. In line with the Brand Hong Kong campaign *Our Tall Story* (Brand Hong Kong, 2017), these images may

provoke a sensorial response that emphasizes depths and altitudes of the city's hilly topography through colour contrasts and top-down perspectives.

The beginning of the experience is also rich in photographs of individual buildings or installations that captured visitor attention. From a representational perspective, these photographs evidence tourists seeking to experience the anticipated emotions implied in the organic image of Hong Kong. By accounting for the visual impact of these photographs, the non-representational approach points to the emotional appeal of Hong Kong visual ambassadorship, which is important for marketing (Li et al., 2016). The composition of such images relies on strong framing and contextualization, on low vertical angles and on medium distance shots. The affective impact is that of fascination with characteristic elements of Hong Kong. The viewer is asked to contemplate features that the photographer deemed worthy of individual consideration. Hence, the corporeal response to the content and composition of the initial photographs likely contributes to establishing emotional connections with the viewer through hallmarks and dramatic city views. Most images are of the offer type. The gazes towards the images are organized so that the viewer is not required to engage, but rather just to observe what is portrayed. The invisibility of the tourist photographer and the strong framing of objects, buildings and installations suggest on one hand a certain sense of anonymity, on the other hand a sense of fascination with the character, novelty, vastness and heights of the big city.

The composition of visual narrative in the beginning of the experience is aligned with the portrayal of the destination Hong Kong as advanced by its marketers. This is emphasised by the similarity of the ambassadors' images with those associated to the brand *Asia's World City* and with the campaign *Our Tall Story*, both promoted by Brand Hong Kong (Brand Hong Kong, 2017). Ambassadors' photographs depicted as an advanced economy, a cosmopolitan, eclectic and vibrant city. Hence, the initial phase of the experience is

associated with a visual ambassadorship that reflects the tourist gaze. Hence, in this phase, the hermeneutic circle of the tourist gaze seems to find confirmation. In this sense, the ambassadorship by exchange students in their first weeks replicates the images that are predominantly advanced by Hong Kong destination marketers and by other visitors. This can be captured at a glance by searching in Google the images associated with the destination name Hong Kong. Yet, as discussed in the results, this does not remain true for the whole duration of the experience.

The portrayal and sharing of cityscapes loses ground as the experience progressively favours representations of less mainstream and more off-the-beaten-path locations. The photographs prioritize Hong Kong's nature as participants begin to undertake more hikes, excursions, and nature walks. The selected photographs are taken during clear days and filtered to look brighter, which suggests that visitors may well portray "groomed spaces" (Hunter, 2010). The predominant colours are bright and modulated, the natural elements have a balanced distribution throughout the frame and the viewer can identify with the photographer overlooking at a long distance. These compositional aspects contribute to an aesthetic appeal connected to pristine outdoors and a sensory engagement that suggests peacefulness and remoteness.

Remote and pristine sights recall unique and different experiences that are valued by Millennials. Unique experiences allow visitors to distance themselves from mainstream mass tourists, and equip them with "bragging rights" (News Bites, 2017; Nisbett & Strzelecka, 2017). The compositional choices of these images are also enticing, almost glamorous, in the eyes of *socialmedialite* tourists who are seeking idealised (and fashionable) tourism experiences. In fact, tourists not only treasure the kind of places that are photographed but also how. Taking quality pictures allows the acquisition of distinctive markers of taste and photography and can be an art form (Jansson, 2018).

Another emerging feature of tourist visual narratives is attention to urban details. These photographs overcome the previous emphasis on synecdochical buildings and the relative use of strong framing, contextualization and upward vertical angle. Photographs gradually shift focus towards the intricate architectural structure of the city. The tourist develops a progressively keener eye for details of the city's architecture, for its hilly topography and for the contrast between "residensity" and open spaces. This may be the result of experiencing mobility in the city through the numerous footbridges and steep and narrow streets. Such sensorial experiencing of these photographs achieves non-representational aims in that it presents the viewer with the "mysterious and unknowable urban life, often encountered by practices of walking and wandering in amongst the city, purposefully drifting" (Xiao et al., 2013, p. 376).

Photographs of details of the urban space are representative of a deeper experience of the destination. In fact, the portrayed elements are more likely to catch the eye of those who are already accustomed to mainstream attractions and iconic elements of the city. This could appeal to Millennials, who value authentic tourist experiences that are viewed as being close to what is experienced by residents (Leask et al., 2013). Because they emphasise unknown and hardly detectable features of the city, the expressive content of these images appeals to tourists who want to escape the mainstreaming of tourist practices by learning and appreciating the destination at a deeper level (Brondoni, 2016; Jansson, 2018). For example, the composition of these images could may appeal affectively to niche tourists such as urban explorers, urban photographers or even rooftoppers.

Photographs of natural landscapes and of urban details reflect experiences that are not intoxicated by the tourist gaze, and have an emotional appeal based on perceptions of uniqueness and authenticity (Jansson, 2018). Hence, photographs taken in the middle phase of the experience have the potential to speak to post-tourists that are adverse to mainstream

travel and seek experiences close to those of residents (Leask et al., 2013). Young travellers and Millennials in particular could be enticed by these images, because they value unique and deep experiences.

The visual narrative constructed and advanced by exchange students in the middle stages of their experience emphasises the less known, more typical and potentially more authentic aspects of Hong Kong. While at a first glance this does not coincide with the most known images of Hong Kong, it has been the effort of local destination marketers to encourage tourists to explore the green areas of the city. This comes across pretty clearly with the "Best of all it's in Hong Kong" campaign, which was launched later in October 2016 (after the data collection for the current study). Marketers seeking to advance images related to less known areas and sights of a destination have an opportunity to leverage imagery created by long stay tourists to do so.

Finally, the experience evolves naturally towards sociality, and compositional changes reflect the desire to record such relationships against the embellished background of destination's synecdochical elements (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Haldrup & Larsen, 2003). The more that participants become immersed, the more that visual materials portray them with their companions. Salience is transferred to the activities being undertaken and to those who are involved. Visual statements shift from the *I-have-seen* to the *I-was-there (-with)*. There is decreased framing of buildings and installations, which become instead elements of contextualization. Photographs of people in particular evoke intimacy through medium and close-up shots, and prompt the viewer to engage through gazes organized at the eye-level front angle of the shots. The portrayal of aspects of sociality has the potential to evoke real life engagement, which is highly valued by Millennials in their experiences (Eventbrite, 2017). In photographs where they are looking away from the camera, tourists are both gazing

and gazed at (Bærenholdt et al., 2004) which addresses the Millennials' desire for identity-creation and escapism (Eventbrite, 2017).

Photographs of personal objects undergo interesting compositional changes during the final phase prior to departure from Hong Kong. The arrangement of the objects for display, the use of low saturation, the use of black and white and finally the layout of selected items emphasize romanticized projected memory, a sense of closure and nostalgia. This is representative of how photographed objects convey a message about a bigger concept by concentrating it into one criterial feature (Kress, 2010). The compositional choices with high vertical angle, frontal angle, close-up shots, and low framing, suggest intimacy and/or ownership on the viewer's part, as well as an attitude of power over the object (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Such compositional choices serve the purpose to portray memorable objects and engagements. Compositional choices that bring a sensorial experience of nostalgia and closure could also be employed to entice repeat visitors, but thanks to their ability of evoking anticipated memories, they may also entice Millennials looking for experiences that enable identity creation.

The photographs shared by exchange students towards the end of the experience have much less to do with the grandiose images shared at the beginning and advanced by destination marketers. In fact, in this phase, ambassadors "own the place" in that the images that are advanced are full of their own interpretation, enriched by their own experience and expressive of their feelings related to the place Hong Kong. The impression is that ambassadors propose an alternative portrayal of the destination through each individual's experience of it. The character of the proposed images is rich of the ambassadors' own feelings and sentiments related to their experience in Hong Kong, which comes across clearly in the relative verbal narrative too. The communicative potential of these images is different,

more relatable and personalised, hence probably better suited to niche markets and to address tourists that seek specific experiences.

The compositional analysis evidenced several aspects of how Millennials communicate their travel experiences. As digital literates, Millennials prefer graphic information before text. Millennials thrive when networked, and are therefore strongly dependent on their mobile applications (or "apps") and on social networks. Add these to the need for instant gratification and frequent rewards, and we can understand better why Millennials communicate about their experiences through digital storytelling (Bernardi, 2018; Prensky, 2012). Visual digital storytelling enables Millennials to seek online for an immediate response to their sharing, which is big part of how Millennials advance their identity into their society of reference.

The fact that digital literacy an essential element of Millennials ongoing identity construction (Knobel, 2008) helps to understand why the researcher could find common compositions across the photographs' content categories. They are a reflection of what exchange students believe their audiences will treasure: it is, in fact, not only about photographing idealised and fashionable places, but also about how they are photographed. The quality of the pictures points to distinctive markers of taste that are themselves (Jansson, 2018). It can be argued that for Millennials it is not only the tourism experience that provides them with bragging rights, but also the ability to represent it according to conventions of photographic beauty that resonate with their peers (News Bites, 2017; Nisbett & Strzelecka, 2017).

In Table 10 (below) the researcher summarizes what has been discussed in this section and organizes the information based around categories of content. The table defines the content of each category, the dominant visual preferences that are expressed, the resulting expressive content and the potential emotional connection that can be established with the

audience. The researcher also suggests potential audiences who may be addressed by each category and defines the phase of the experience (beginning, middle and end) in which such compositions are more likely to manifest themselves in tourist-generated photographs.

It is worth disussing the potential audiences addressed at every different point in time by the different roles highlighted in this thesis. Destination marketing has been looking at narratives because of the identification that they trigger. If a narrator advances a personal character, and a listener finds coherence with it, a mental simulation is triggered, which allows the audience to identify with the narrator's character and the narrative will more likely enhance their knowledge and awareness about the destination as well as their intention to visit it (Escalas, 2004a; Tussyadiah et al., 2011). Adding the potential of story-telling to the digital era's time-space compression afforded by communication technologies, means that individuals all over the world benefit from larger and more dispersed audiences for their self-projections (Lo et al., 2011; Urry & Larsen, 2011). The idea that the audience is potentially always reachable and the Millennials' tendency to consistently use social media, emphasises that narratives are constructed in a way that is meaningful for the anticipated audiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

The table below emphasises types of tourists that could potentially identify with the narratives advanced by exchange students at different points in time. The audiences have been identified based on the visual communication and the emotional appeal of the photographs.

Images of cityscapes, for example, have the potential to entice urban tourists and in particular new visitors. That is because of the predominance of urban buildings in the images and because these images advance well known, mainstream attractions, they are likely useful to address new tourists to Hong Kong and they align with the images normally advanced by marketers of the destination.

In addition to specific segments of tourists that can be reached by different categories of visual narrative, it is notable that online visual communication in itself has potential to be employed by destination marketers. Discover Hong Kong has set a good example in this sense, by re-posting on their instagram account user generated images. Milennials at large are definitely an audience for such practice, first of all because they are avid instagram users but also because the images are generated by other travellers or peers, rather than directly by a marketing agency, which makes, in their eyes, the image more trustworthy and emotionally more appealing.

Besides destination marketers being able to use tourist generated photographs, it is the type of content that determines wider outreach. In fact, Millennials are increasingly seeking authentic, non-mainstream travel experiences. Exchange studenst have advanced a deeper, more diverse and broader destination experience than the average tourists in Hong Kong would, and this is exemplified in particular through images of natural landscapes and urban details. There is the potential here for destination marketers to address audiences like millennials and Generation Z that are on the look for authentic experiences. And the identification with exchange students can be easy, as their personas, especially in the role of exchange student and resident student, encourage them to search for these less mainstream experiences.

Having discussed how the photographic compositional choices evolve through the experience, the researcher now proceeds to discuss the evolution of the verbal Hong Kong ambassadorship in light of the roles discussed in chapter 4.

Table 10 - An overview of compositions

Category	Cityscapes	Buildings and installations	Objects		Natural Landscapes	People	Urban Details
Content	Night views of the city lights; Street views; Daylight city views.	Iconic Hong Kong buildings; Urban and art installations.	Personal objects Iconic objects Eye-catching objects		Beaches Hiking Trails Seaside views	Self Companions Interesting individuals	Architectural elements
Composition	Saturation, vivid colours, strong contrasts; Long distance frontal angles; High vertical angles; Offer type.	Strong framing and contextualization; Low vertical angle; medium distance frontal angle; Offer type.	Strong framing; High vertical angle; Close-up frontal angle; Offer type.	Strong framing; Low saturation; Black and white; High vertical angle; close-ups frontal angles; Volumes in engagement (in use)	Bright, and modulated; Eye-level vertical angle; Long distance frontal angle; Contextualization; Volumes arranged to balance the distribution of natural elements across the frame; Evident use of filtering.	Frontal and eye-level angles; medium and close-ups frontal angles; Demand type - gazes address the viewer;	Layered volumes – play with fore-/backgrounding; predominant grey (concrete);
Expressive Content	Glossy, eventful, vast, high-rise. Congruent with brands: Asia's world city, Our Tall Story.	Fascinating; Characteristic; Iconic.	Contemplation, something that sparked interest	Ownership; Closure; Nostalgia.	Groomed spaces; Peacefulness; Remoteness.	Intimacy; Joyous occasions.	Originality and authenticity through - Insiders' point of view; - Residensity vs openness,
Emotional appeal	Substantiation of anticipated hallmarks and dramatic views; Fascination with novelty, vastness and heights; Anonymity.	Fascination with Hong Kong's character; Awe, contemplation; Anonymity.	Fascination with Hong Kong's character; Awe, contemplation; Anonymity.	Romanticized projected memory;	Uniqueness; Authenticity (like the residents).	Socialization; Real life Engagement; Identity-creation; Escapism.	Uniqueness; Authenticity (like the residents).
Potential audience	New visitors Urban travellers	New tourists willing to experience unfamiliar yet renowned sights	New tourists and special interests enticed by novelty.	Repeat tourists; Millennials looking for unique experiences	Post-tourists averse to mainstream; Long stay tourists;	Millennials and tourists that treasure human connections.	Post-tourists Niche markets of urban tourism (urban explorers, urban photographers, rooftoppers)
Phase	Beginning	Beginning	Beginning	Middle, End	Middle, End	End	Middle, End

5.2   Roles: fluid identities and Hong Kong narratives

As was initially suggested through the evolution of photographs of Hong Kong, narratives are selective and situated. This implies that the episodes and aspects of the destination that are expressed reflect what participants chose to remember, forget, neglect and amplify. In addition, this study has confirmed that selected episodes and elements reflect how ambassadors construct their identities. In fact, narratives collected through the exchange reveal what participants expressed as their self-perception within the stream of experience. One reason why the researcher investigated both the changing identities and the contexts of retelling is that both identities and narratives are fluid and circumstantial (Riessman, 2008).

The researcher used three roles to illustrate the onflow of identities. The projected roles correspond to states of mind determining their lifestyles in the destination. The acculturation to Hong Kong and how the destination was navigated were influenced by whether the participant's mindset was tourist, exchange student or resident student. Importantly, it impacted ultimately on accounts of Hong Kong. It is evident that roles are instruments that signify identity, and corresponding choices about acculturation, relationships, and ultimately Hong Kong ambassadorship. The idea that exchange students assume different roles is not new, as previous researchers concluded that institutional websites promoting exchange programs encourage students to take a dual student-tourist stance towards the experience (Michelson & Álvarez Valencia, 2016). But the current study is, to the researcher's knowledge, the first to trace the evolution of such stances through the experience and how these influence exchange students as senders, rather than receivers, of destination ambassadorship.

The extended time that was adapted in the research highlighted that roles provide a means of navigating the destination. These are not necessarily those that the same individuals

would choose if they were in Hong Kong for either a single purpose (e.g. holiday) or for a short period. On the contrary, the longitudinal approach of the study allowed the researcher to observe how the same participants adopted different roles progressively. The brief stay of the average tourist to Hong Kong would not have allowed for data collection that would observe the fluidity of identities. Pleasingly, the researcher was able to trace the different roles through the course of the student exchange.

Triangulation between verbal narratives and visual narratives added other interesting discussion points.

The literature review in chapter two revealed that, until now, tourist photography has been viewed as a means of anticipating future memories and fixing them into a visual device. In doing so, photographers supposedly anticipate the impression they wish to make on the society of reference, based on their affiliations and interests (Emmison et al., 2012; Lo & McKercher, 2015) and use photographic composition consistent with relative conventions of beautiful scenery, joyful occasions and unique attractions (Andersson Cederholm, 2012). The results of the present study partly confirmed these assumptions. There is a clear correspondence between participant photographic compositions and the conventions required by the audience of reference to elicit the wanted emotional responses. Yet, the present study has identified two main elements of destination ambassadorship that are engrained in the exchange student, which also apply to most young and longer-stay tourists.

The first element is a consequence of the pervasiveness and steadiness of exchange students' connectivity with their audiences through instant communication technologies and social media. This translates into continuous transmission of Hong Kong ambassadorship and immediate reachability of the reference audience put to the fore at that specific moment of the experience. Also, there is likely an immediate feedback from the audience (for example in the form of *likes* on the photo posted on Instagram, or in the form of a conversation, either

textual or verbal). Recent research has found that post-modern tourists treasure the possibility to share images and get feedback from others as a key interest to their travels, which in turn affects how pictures are taken and inspire travellers to undertake strategies that will gain them positive attention (Jansson, 2018).

Hence visitors construct their Hong Kong ambassadorship based on how they imagine it will be delivered at some future time (Belk & Yeh, 2011). However, it should be acknowledged that the moment of delivery is close to the moment that the ambassadorship is constructed, and contemporaneous to the tourist experience. This points to a limitation of previous research on tourists' verbal and visual narratives, and that most has relied on a single data collection episode to capture the whole of the destination experience. In this way previous researchers failed to account for the interdependence of narrative construction and transmission in today's ever-connected tourism phenomenon. In particular, previous research assumed that narratives would be delivered at some future time, ignoring that delivery of travel narratives now occurs contemporaneous with the travel. Hence, the future occasion when tourists will narrate their travel is not afterwards, but occurs, and changes in tandem. The current longitudinal approach has observed how the delivery of the narratives occurs during the destination experience, and has shown the relationship with the narrative construction practices. It has also considered the new reality that emergent technologies render the reference audience continuously accessible.

The considerations noted above constitute the premises for the second main point of the study. If the researcher had ignored exchange students' continuous connectedness and continuous narrative transmission, the ambassadorship about the destination would have been reduced to the accounts given at one point in time. However, by letting travellers narrate their experience through its course, the researcher could differentiate different narratives of the same place. Thanks to the narrative and compositional analyses, the researcher found that

Hong Kong is to the exchange student a different place at different points in time. Hence, there is not one narrative about Hong Kong by each individual who visited, but several narratives from the same individual at different times. The reasons behind the fact that narratives change can be traced to identity construction. In the contemporary world of communications, it is the digital literacy itself that shapes the on-going construction of one's identity (Knobel, 2008, p. 137). Digital media allow students **to stay connected** with the home environment and with their peers in the destination throughout the experience. This affects the acculturation process and the relationship with the destination. To summarize such changes, the researcher chose to symbolize them with roles.

The first sign of evolving identities was given by aspects of acculturation, particularly the evolution of acculturative stressors. In fact, the researcher found that the impact of some of them increased over time, though the overall acculturative stress decreased. It has to do with exchange students changing coping mechanisms. In fact, some of the stressors that were originally faced head on, later turned into aspects of life that the exchange students purposely chose not to adapt to. Or, some destination features (such as the hustle and bustle) that were considered almost positive or fascinating at the beginning of the experience were perceived as negative in the long run. As explained in the findings, the researcher found a strong correspondence between the acculturation strategies and the role to the fore. Acculturation is substantially dictated by motivations, personal characteristics and attitudes, which are relevant elements of an individual's self-image. Hence, participants' perceptions of their contingent identity and its priorities prescribes certain choices in terms of acculturation. Notably, in their role as exchange students, participants coped with stressors in a learning mind-set, trying to acknowledge differences, get accustomed to them and fulfil the obligations of good exchange students.

The foregrounding of the role, by influencing acculturation choices, also has implications for the relationship established with Hong Kong. The literature review explained how the relationship is based on individuals seeking congruity with their self-image and satisfying related needs. The resulting relationship consists of the interactions, consumption rituals and generally the way the destination is interwoven into the daily lives of visitors, which was symbolized in this study through the concept of lifestyle (Fournier, 1998; Hankinson, 2004). Following up the exchange student role example, the selecting activities and habits of participants' might connote their stay as an emotional place, a once in a life-time opportunity and a period of personal growth and change. Hence participants in this role go out of their comfort zone, treasure novelty and socialization. The following is an example of how upholding the good exchange student role determines acculturation and the activities that define the destination with Hong Kong. For the sake of coming across as adventurous, open-minded and willing to try new things, participants follow their peers into activities they would not normally like.

Amber, for example, tags along as other exchange students go clubbing in LKF, though she is aware that this is not her "cup of tea". Yet, she was able to see the positive aspects:

"So we went... Like I said we went to LKF and I told them I probably might not stay there long. But for the first hour or two it was just us and we were listening to music and they were drinking […] we just sat at the table and we listened to their playlist and they played like backstreet boys and spice girls and we were like... we were singing the songs! It was wonderful... we were like "oh I love this song!" and so we were just... listening... but yeah it wasn't so bad."

Further evidence that the acculturation process of each participant has an important influence on exchange students' way of experiencing the destination is the fact that some

students (mainly the Australian-Malaysian respondent and one of the Chinese respondents) were rather overwhelmed by the initial need to settle in and adjust. In Janine's words:

"I: how was it, like, was it easy to avoid all the touristy things while you were waiting for him [her boyfriend came to visit]? J: I think I was just trying to get comfortable, and I was mostly shopping, mostly trying to make friends, mostly studying like with assignments, so I think it was ok. Just... cause I didn't really wait him I guess I just didn't have time and then when he was here we had a lot of time with him and I was just like let's go there." [fourth interview]

Finally, there are the consequences of roles on the narrative. As noted by Riessman (2008), narratives tell about events that narrate an identity. The narratives collected by the researcher in this study recount the identities corresponding to the roles. This means, for example, that a participant in his/her exchange student role would want to come across as adventurous, resourceful and open-minded. Therefore, the construction of the narrative is informed by this persona, which is why the relative ambassadorship has the advantages of turning any event into a positive and leaves little space for complaints or mention of negative aspects. Hence, even stressors came across as positive, in that they represent opportunities for growth and learning.

The change of role is displayed through the upholding of a different persona by respondents. Once the role of the resident student became predominant, participants appeared to settle in and become familiar with Hong Kong, having made choices as to what they were willing to acculturate to and what not. The acculturation strategy of the resident student was aimed at upholding a different image of self, that of someone who is familiar with the destination and knows how to live in it. In terms of acculturation, the motivations change: while previously the felt pressure to get accustomed to differences seemed the priority, in this role the ability to navigate difficult cultural aspects in a tolerable manner is what is sought

for. Hence, the relationship with Hong Kong is based on the establishment of rituals and habits, on knowing it from a residents' point of view and living it as a second home where there is space for obligations related to long term academic and professional development. As such, an entitlement to criticize certain aspects of life in Hong Kong followed. The hustle and bustle of the city was narrated in the exchange student role as "there is always something happening" "a lot of international people", "many things to do", but it became at later stages "crowded", "noisy" and "hectic". Similarly, the lack of space was barely a complaint at the beginning of the experience with the exception of descriptions of the room in the student halls, but towards the end of the experience it became much more central to the narrative of Hong Kong, in particular with reference to the anticipated return home, where it does not represent an issue.

What has been explained until now regarding the exchange student role and the resident student role, remains true for the tourist role. In fact, in the vest of this role, participants behave and identify with tourists. This role connects to the identity of the traveller, hence encouraging a relatively superficial approach to acculturation exemplified by stresses being common to tourists such as language barrier, crowding and local service culture. The participant in the tourist role seeks to explore as much as possible of the destination, by approaching the most famous attractions and sites first. It encourages participants to make the most of the limited time, hence emphasising the liminality of the experience. Another aspect of this role is the relevance given to the separation from the origin countries' obligations and stresses, and the sense of freedom perceived in Hong Kong. Hence, the corresponding relationship established with Hong Kong is similar to the navigation of any tourist destination, seen as the space for leisure and where to take a break. In terms of ambassadorship the tourist role translates into an emphasis on differences from the home

country, novelty and an overall confirmation of the organic image they participants previously held of Hong Kong.

In Table 11 the researcher attempted to summarize aspects of acculturation, relationship and ambassadorship that correspond to the different roles coming to the fore, namely the roles of Resident Student, Exchange Student and Tourist, by mentioning the key characteristics for each of them.

Table 11 - Acculturation, relationships and ambassadorship behaviours in each role

	Resident student	Exchange Student	Tourist
Acculturation	*Stresses:* Academic obligations; Financial concerns; Family expectations; Career choices; Accommodation in Student Halls; Lack of space. *Attitudes* Diligence; Dedication to immediate and urgent matters; long term perspective.	*Stresses:* Different etiquette and service culture; Liminality of the experience; Social aspects; Lack of space. *Attitudes:* Open mindedness; Resilience; Independence.	*Stresses:* Language barrier; Service culture; Crowding. *Attitudes:* Adventurousness; Take advantage of limited time; Take a break.
Relationship	*Hong Kong's function:* As (second) home; To establish new habits and routines; To develop professionally and academically.	*Hong Kong's function:* As an emotional space; As the marker of a phase in their life; As the theatre for participants' personal growth and change.	*Hong Kong's function:* Holiday destination; Escape from home environment and obligations.
Ambassadorship	*Communication about Hong Kong* Negative aspects; Functionality (bureaucracy); Habits and routines.	*Communication about Hong Kong* Interesting aspects; Differences from the home environment and other destinations; Anticipated memories of the place.	*Communication about Hong Kong* Novelty; Attractions; Leisurely sights and places.

Finally, the key element of the changes in acculturation, relationship and ambassadorship is that roles, even though clearly defined, are not mutually exclusive, but rather often overlapping and sometimes even in conflict. The hybridity of roles and their alternation throughout the experience is evident in Hong Kong ambassadorship not only in that participants return different images and opinions of Hong Kong at different times, but also because the same narrative occasion can include contradicting messages and identities.

For example, the resident student role requires the establishment of a basis of routines and rituals in the destination, while the exchange student role calls for meaningful encounters and activities that can enrich the participant experience through cultural learning and the establishment of new relationships.

Seeking narratives of habits and routines, the researcher asked participants whether there were places where they spent most of their time. The following excerpt represents the latent conflict of roles that drives narrative. Amber seems contradictory. At first she says that besides her school and dorm there are no actual places where she spends time. On the other hand, she recounts places where she *always* goes and *loves to go to*, indicating that there are habitual places in her navigation of Hong Kong.

"I don't think there is any place where i spend the most time because we are always trying to explore new places. I always try to explore new places... i guess technically i spend most time in the shtm building and my room. Yeah, but, we go quite a few different places. And even the dumpling place that we usually go to all the time, i am going other food places now... our goal is like to go to every single MTR station... So we just, like, check them off, so.... I love TST, we explored further into that over the holiday, that was lovely, and then in Causeway Bay... actually we keep going to the same places but we figured like, we keep getting, we would get lost, and so know we are figuring out the map the more we go... But, yeah there is just so much into... is a small city but there is a lot of mixing"

This excerpt exemplifies how important it is for the respondent to uphold her role of explorative exchange students, while the resident student role is naturally gaining importance in her life in the destination. Amber almost struggles to admit that she has favourite places that she returns regularly to, because she feels that she should be seeing and exploring much more places and undertake diverse activities. She finally admits that part of the reason why

she returns to the same places is due to the fact that she is still trying to figure out how to move around the city.

As mentioned above, the data did not evidence exact and clear-cut alternation of roles, but there were definitely moments that, probably because of the common structure of the student exchange, marked phases throughout the semester. By providing a summary of such phases below (in Table 12), the researcher seeks by no means to say that the sequence here proposed is common to all exchanges or all tourist experiences, but rather she hopes to exemplify the potential of knowing which role is to the fore. In fact, as it will be discussed in the conclusions section, there is ample space for marketers to track this succession *live* thanks to the continuous connectedness of modern travellers through social media. The figure below summarizes how the role (and hence the identities) that participants aspire to influence their acculturation, relationship with Hong Kong and ambassadorship. The researcher displays the roles in a chronological order based on the data collection episodes and identifies the prevalent role in each period of time.

Table 12 – The onflow of roles: implications for acculturation, relationships and ambassadorships

	Pre	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	Post
Role(s)	Resident student (Anticipated) Exchange student	Exchange student Tourist	Exchange student Resident Student	Exchange student Resident Student		Exchange student
Ambassadorship	Organic image; Hong Kong as international, multicultural, modern, busy.	Organic image confirmed Visual (Skyline, Cityscapes, Artificial lights) Verbal busy, crowded, active	Saturation with negative aspects advances non-mainstream and natural sites; Familiarity advances authenticity. Liminality advances romanticization	Closure – personal change and memories Negative aspects in positive connotation		Comparison with home environment. Nostalgia Celebratory of Hong Kong as emotional place
Relationship	Based on congruity with motivations Hong Kong as the place to fulfill personal development	Like a holiday destination Place for freedom Place for personal growth Seeking cultural differences and novelty	Liminality: checklist approach (see as much as possible) Length of stay: familiarity and routines			Hong Kong as a place in life
Acculturation	Diligent preparation Gaining information Curiosity Adaptability	Assimilation and Integration Positive attitudes to differences Cultural learning mindset	Acceptance Selected aspect to acculturate to and not Academic stress			Re-acculturation to home environment Re-acculturation to non-exchange life
Time	Pre	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	Post

5.3   The social situated-ness of constructing and transmitting narratives

Thanks to the analysis of the processes through the frameworks of acculturation, relationship and ambassadorship, the researcher traced back aspects of each of the roles to the fore. In addition, thanks to the longitudinal data collection, she was also able to place the unfolding of all of these onto the timeline of the student exchange, as defined by the data collection episodes (namely the six in-depth interview occasions and the three photographs collection episodes). The researcher now seeks to explain how all that has been discussed above relates to the social situated-ness of the narratives, hence the perspective audiences that are addressed and the contexts of meaning creation (Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2017).

Figure 24 (below)   summarizes the implications of the prioritized role during the construction and the transmission of narrative about Hong Kong. The researcher presents the points under the title "Transmission" as the main aspects pointed out by exchange students when talking about Hong Kong in the context of communicating about the place and being

asked about it. This means that in summarizing the social situated-ness of transmission the researcher paid attention to the occasions of re-telling. The researcher analysed the interviews to understand to what role did the relative narrative responded when being transmitted. She also analysed the narrative of Hong Kong from the point of view of the social situated-ness of its construction. This is the sum of all the above considerations. Construction of the narrative was a result of the role being at the fore at each moment of the lived experience and its consequences on acculturation, relationship and ambassadorship.

The main implication is that the identity advanced through the narrative may not necessarily coincide with the identity that was central in the construction of the narrative. This is not only due to the fact that there was a lag between the moment of the actual events recounted and those of transmission on the occasion of the interview, but also to the fact that the moment of transmission could have been a moment of transition or conflict between roles. Yet, the current study focuses on the formation of destination ambassadors, which means that the main unit of observation is ambassadorship, hence transmission of narrative. Which is why the researcher attempted to trace what happens to ambassadorship throughout the experience and uses communication as the starting point for the implications that will be discussed in the conclusions. While the following section will discuss turning points of the Hong Kong ambassadorship based on pivotal events, the current discussion of the unfolding of Hong Kong ambassadorship is merely chronological.

The researcher found that in the phase prior to the departure from the origin country the participants recounted events and facts that occurred in virtue of their role as resident-students. In fact, participants narrated how they prepared for and gathered information about Hong Kong, showing diligence. They also discussed motivations as to why they chose it as a destination in a rational manner, emphasising in this phase the anticipated professional benefits of carrying out the experience in Hong Kong. Yet, the narrative occasion of the

interview was interesting, because the interviewer (the researcher) was at that time already based in Hong Kong. In addition, given that the prerequisite to participate in the study was that of being an exchange student, participants feel expected in the conversation with the researcher to play out exactly that role. Hence their narrative about Hong Kong (or better the organic image they hold of it at this point) is interesting because it's optimistic, hence overall positive, aimed at showing that students' have knowledge of the place, therefore mostly corresponding with the organic image they have of the place based on the sources they used, mostly the internet and previous exchange students.

In the second and third in-depth interview, hence on arrival at the destination, the exchange student role is still predominant in the transmission of the narrative. In fact, exchange students manifest positive and accommodating attitudes to cultural differences and excitement for novelty. Yet it is clear that the way they navigated the destination, which allowed the construction of such narratives, is a blend of the exchange student and the tourist role. While the former drives the student to establish certain routines and gives a certain structure to their daily lives through the chores they have to carry out and the academic commitments, the initial phase is also marked by undertaking many tourist activities. In fact, the beginning is when exchange students feel the greatest freedom (because the academic commitments are still mild), they feel the urge to get to do as much as possible and to do it in those places that they have heard about before (checklist approach).

Starting with the third data collection episode, participants negotiate the role of exchange student and that of traveller in the destination. It is from then on that the researcher noticed the importance of the perceived role in making exchange students perceive Hong Kong as an emotional place. Amber exemplifies the implications of such negotiation on Hong Kong with her discussion:

"Every vacation you ever went on it's like a waste, cause now we are in a whole new city, a whole new country, and you imagine like the one week you spent somewhere else, you probably didn't even touch the great places to be. While here you get to really take your time and discover everything possible".

An interesting aspect of this statement is the reference to *here* as both Hong Kong and the student exchange. In fact, it is not related to a city virtue that exchange students are able to spend longer there than tourists. In this sense, the association between the place name "Hong Kong" and the student exchange is very similar to the previously discussed association between the place name and the place brand. Place names recall people's associations and perceptions about the place, even when the place's brand is not purposely managed (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, 2011).

In this study it has been found that participants associate the place name "Hong Kong" with both the city of Hong Kong as a destination and the student exchange as an experience. Therefore, talking about Hong Kong could mean both the city and the exchange. This is interesting within the discussion on destination ambassadorship. The research findings show tangible instances of communication about the destination that is in fact not about the destination, but about the experience (and not necessarily the touristic experience) in it. This is an important contribution to literature on destination ambassadorship and place promotion, because it clarifies what the place name entails based on the role to the fore. In particular, it allows scholars to better understand the phases of, as well as the content and the reasons behind, ambassadorship construction. Managerial implications could be understanding when and how to better leverage exchange students' ambassadorship throughout the experience. But the actual detail is understanding when and to what extent the DMOs are in control of construction of destination communication.

As the semester proceeds, the tourist role will gradually lose prominence, to make space, instead, for the resident-student role. In fact, during the fourth and fifth in-depth interview, corresponding to the middle and the end of the experience, participants still uphold the exchange student role but in mediation with their roles as resident student. The former encourages students to make the most of their exchange period, and emphasises the perception of Hong Kong as an emotional space. The resident-student role brings participants to a more stable lifestyle in the destination, with the acceptance of aspects of acculturation they could not get used to. Through saturation with certain aspects of life in the destination such as crowding and pollution, come new ways of navigating the place in order to compensate. The consequences in terms of ambassadorship are that exchange students feel familiarized with the place, therefore capable of recounting what is authentic and providing an insiders' perspective. They also feel less pressured not to advance negative communication about Hong Kong.

The previous discussions about how respondents dealt with prejudicial treatment exemplified the social situated-ness of both the narrated event and of the narrating occasion. At this stage of the experience (the mid and late part) participants feel expected to fulfil a certain role, which comes to the fore: that of the student-resident. Participants perceive less of an obligation to present themselves as positive and capable to face difficulties (characteristics that are attributed to the role of the exchange student), and more of an entitlement to point out problems. As time has gone by, they also own the narrative about Hong Kong with more confidence. Hence, in terms of ambassadorship, while prejudicial treatments episodes were previously recounted with a generally positive attitude, they will at this stage enter the narrative of Hong Kong with a negative connotation.

Finally, after a few weeks from their return home, their role as exchange student comes strongly to the fore. In fact, the home institution's context and being the anchors of the

student exchange in Hong Kong to others, puts them in the role of anchors of Hong Kong, namely persons of reference. In advancing communication about Hong Kong they always combine suggestions for travel and suggestion for the student exchange. Hence as ambassadors they have in this phase a dual identity of tourists and exchange students. The former role encourages them to advance a very positive communication about the place, the second encourages them to provide also a positive image of their selves within the destination experience. In addition, as exchange students they strive to provide unknown facts about Hong Kong. Finally, an important element is the fact that as exchange students at the end of their experience, they use this phase to make sense of the Hong Kong chapter of their lives: they are inevitably influenced by a certain degree of nostalgia, which translates in a rather romanticized and therefore positive communication about Hong Kong.

Table 13 - Social Situated-ness of the narratives – construction and transmission of ambassadorship based on roles

5.4   A new framework – acculturation in the digital era

In the previous sections the researcher explained two main points. Firstly, that narratives from exchange students pointed to evolving roles that they strived to uphold. And secondly, in discussing the social situatedness of narratives construction, the researcher pointed out to how acculturation represented the context of construction of such narratives. Finally, the researcher closes the loop by defining the new acculturation framework that emerged from this research. Every acculturation process starts when different cultures are in contact. A negotiation between retention of one's own culture and adoption of the host culture starts. Humans go through this process to find a new functioning in a new context. Acculturation has been object of study for decades. Yet, little research seems to have focused on acculturation in the digital era. The digital era, with its communication technologies, provides new contexts and new instruments for the acculturation process to unfold.

This research has investigated ambassadorship, intended as the message about a destination, on the part of Millennials in the digital era. The digital era provides the means of communication for the message that has been the focus of this study as well as the typical communicators of the messages, the Millennials. As such, the study provides a better understanding of communication in the digital era.

The study has emphasised, through the analysis of the message about Hong Kong, which aspects of the Millennials as communicators are important in shaping Hong Kong destination ambassadorship. Millennials are a population that prefers experience to things. This explains why storytelling and forms of communication that provide an emotional appeal resonate more with them. They can identify and vicariously live the experiences that they strive for. The need for identification is also a reflection of the importance put on upholding a certain reputation. Hence, the experiences that they undertake and the messages that they construct are put together with a view that they will afford them bragging rights.

The acculturation process also emerges as being different from what described from most of the previous literature because of the affordances of communication technologies to acculturating individuals. Individuals have, nowadays, continuous access to communication media. This significantly affects one of the premises of the acculturation process: that one has to leave (even if temporarily) the home environment. But is it truly a separation if we can communicate with our families on a daily basis?

The digital era's means of communication and their affordances have reshaped the way visitors can advance messages about a destination, hence destination ambassadorship. New communication technologies, especially the ones enabled by mobile phones, have dramatically changed the way we communicate with others, the way we gather and analyse information and ultimately the way we construct our identities. A few points have to be noted about communication in the digital era. a) Individuals have easy access to media. That means easy access to information. As a visitor to Hong Kong for example, there are multiple sources of information about a destination that one could benefit from. Such sources of information are also readily reachable throughout the destination experience. Destination marketers are well aware of the pervasiveness of media, and in particular of social media, in everyone's daily life. Hence, they advance desired images of destinations on social media and overall in the online world. The purpose may be to attract new visitors to the destination, but also to encourage visitors to navigate the destination more easily. b) The population of this study, the Millennials, is a product of the digital era. Milennials are digital literate and digital storytellers. They express themselves through the digital technologies and in the form of digital storytelling. These are the instruments that they know for advancing their identity. In particular the social media discourse, including the visual social media discourse, is the form with which they advance their identities. c) The digital era is characterised by pervasive

connectedness. This has several implications: speed of exchange of information, expectations for quick feedback, and reliance on online communication as a form of support.

From the point of view of acculturation, the affordances of the digital era surely have some implications. The exchange students in this study could easily keep in touch with their home environment. Exchange students could benefit from constant connectedness to their peers and families back at home. This meant they could receive, although remotely, their family and friends' support and they could (and sometimes had to) maintain relationships back at home while on exchange. Examples are exchange students that were in committed relationships and that back at home lived together with their partners, maintained their relationships and could easily stay in touch with them. In addition, several of the exchange students' parents and friends came to visit from their origin countries.

Acculturation was also simplified by the ability to receive and access destination information easily and quickly, which would have not been possible before the digital era. This definitely makes the process of adjustment to a destination easier than it could have been imagined by the time many of the acculturation theories had been created. The unknown of a host destination is less unknown now, and when it is, just for a little longer, until we can reach our smartphone and make sense of it through the Internet. Hence, we can expect that the acculturative stresses would be different. In this sense, it's interesting to see how the hustle and bustle and the lack of space become stressors only later on in the experience. It is likely that exchange students knew that they had to expect crowds, fast pace and small room. But no one had taught them or warned them about handling them in the long term. That has been possible only through the negotiation of a balance.

The pervasiveness of connectedness to sources of information and to social media makes it so that the individual personal characteristics and motivations evolve throughout the acculturating process. It also has the potential to influence the type of identity that individuals

in this study felt they needed to uphold. In fact, if it wasn't so easy to be in touch with peer students back at home or with representatives of the home institution, the exchange student may have partially lost sight of the expectations cast upon exchange students to be adventurous, open minded, exploring, to be learning and "bringing back" something. Hence, communication technologies of the digital era allow students much more in the acculturation process by potentially attenuating the effects of acculturative stressors and influencing the identity they chose to uphold by keeping them connected to the home audience. When contextualised within this pervasive connectedness, social media come to assume also another role: they not only determine the form that the message about the destination takes, but also allow communicators to envision their aspired audiences and social contexts as readily accessible. As such, the desired audience becomes part of the identity construction process.

One implications is that the assumption of previous acculturation frameworks that pre-existing personal characteristics and motivations determine the acculturative strategy of individuals does not hold. Partially because data collection has traditionally been non-longitudinal, researchers have assumed that every individual has and potentially maintains the same motivations when acculturating to a place. This research has show that these are evolving. Hence, acculturation is influenced more by the identity (or role) uphold at a certain point in time than by the previous characteristic of an individual demonstrated at the very beginning of the experience; Hence, the ABCs of acculturation are driven by identities and by the relationship established with the destination on the basis of these. Traditionally, ABCs were considered predictors of acculturation outcomes, while this research suggests that they are rather consequences within acculturation of the roles upheld. Before we can explain ambassadorship through acculturation, we need to explain acculturation through identities.

The acculturation framework should be re-envisioned as a continuous non-linear process whereby the choic of the role to uphold determines the chosen ABCs of acculturation, which in return result in choices on how to navigate and relate to the destination Hong Kong. In this sense, the chosen role is the starting point: based on it, individuals select certain identities to advance and such identities reflect internally, in their attitudes, behaviours and thoughts, which is the acculturative component, as well as externally, resulting in outcomes such as chosen activities and established lifestyle in the destination that should fulfil that role, which is the relationship component. The image below is a simplified illustration of the connections between roles, acculturation and relationship in the digital era.

Figure 13 - Acculturation in the digital era
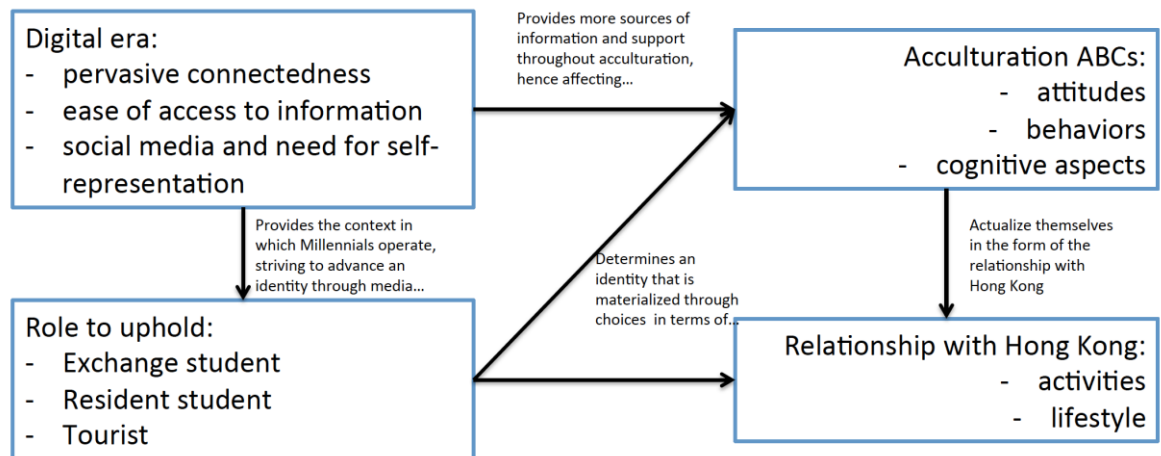
5.5 Ambassadorship reconfigured

A major study finding is that destination ambassadorship cannot be reduced to a single communication type for each individual. In addition, based on previous research, it was

expected that exchange students would attribute relaxation and leisure related emotions to the experience, and not merely conveyed discourses of education and learning that ratify the social capital obtained by participating in a study abroad experience (Michelson & Álvarez Valencia, 2016). This has previously been discussed in terms of the construction and transmission of the changing social situated-ness of ambassadorship. In the present section, the researcher summarizes how, when and why communication about Hong Kong is likely to change.

Prior to the departure for Hong Kong, as it was discussed in the results (sections 4.2.2.1.1, 4.2.2.1.2, and 4.2.2.1.3), participants return narratives that reflect their balancing of the roles of resident students in their own country and anticipations of the role of exchange students in Hong Kong.

When asked what they intend to do once in Hong Kong, they answer in the following ways:

"To definitely learn the language, or some amount of it. Just to explore some of the destinations and attractions, historical sites, monastery, temples, just learn so much more than I do now. Try some food that I probably wouldn't try usually, and to make some at least a couple of lifelong friends from this experience. And to excel in school of course, that is number one!" [Amber, first interview, prior departure].

"[…] I'd like to know deeply about the Hong Kong students, local students" [Bart, first interview].

"I've always lived with my family. I'll be independent. I'll have to cook by myself. It'll be scary, but it'll be fun. I think I'll learn a lot, definitely." [Janine, first interview]

These excerpts exemplify how participants focus on their abilities as exchange students: there is a palpable attempt to show ability for cultural learning, open-mindedness,

exploration as well as attention to academic obligations. In addition, they show positive attitudes serving the purpose of building their identities as resilient individuals.

In line with the role of resident student, in the phase prior to departure, participants demonstrate to have prepared and researched the destination diligently. Hence the narratives that derive from it not only inform the researcher regarding the sources of information they used, but also returns the participants' organic image of Hong Kong based on these sources. Narrative of Hong Kong at this point is therefore mostly congruent with the organic image. Many participants have asked or heard from previous exchange students in Hong Kong, as often the origin institutions require exchange students to write reports about their experience that are conveyed to future exchange students. In addition, there is of course the image of Hong Kong that the student develops based on the Internet. To exemplify this point:

"Well, when it was time to choose the destination, I was reading just that I mentioned, the different exchange stories of people. Partly based on that, it was really good things said about the school, that the courses are good and the teachers are great, and then also the destination, it's so easy to travel to anywhere from there. As I said, it's also close to nature even though it's a really big city and you can find everything from there and they have something there every day." [Iris, first interview]

When asked in this phase "how would you describe Hong Kong?" participants returned the following images of Hong Kong:

"Charlotte: I think the beat of life is faster than here and maybe people in Hong Kong are more tired. They always sleep late, will stay late. Not much more."

"Heather: I think Hong Kong is international city. I think that Hong Kong is similar to Korea in some ways like Hong Kong is very small but there are many people"

"Like I know that the food is amazing. It's busy. Everyone says that you have to walk really fast. The shopping will be cheap." [Janine]

Hence the results evidence is that, prior departure, students juggle between the resident student role in their own country and the anticipated role as exchange students.

The first month in the destination (corresponding to data collections on arrival and one month after) evidence a type of narrative that seems to confirm the organic image that exchange students have of the place. This is visible not only through the verbal narrative, but is also confirmed in the visual narrative. In this sense, data from this phase confirm previous literature about the tourist gaze. It emerges clearly that exchange students in this phase tend to reproduce "socially patterned and learnt" ways of seeing Hong Kong, materializing the anticipations they had (Urry, 1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 3). Though such phases, exchange students navigate, perceive and interpret Hong Kong based on what was emphasised in their prior organic images of the place (McGregor, 2000).

In fact, the role of tourist prevails in the construction of narratives and participants proceed to explore mainstream Hong Kong. With regard to transmitting narratives, the prevalence of the exchange student role makes the ambassadorship mostly positive, and participants transmit an overall accepting and curious attitude towards what the city has to offer. Such curiosity is reflected in the visual materials portraying eye-catching objects and singling out interesting buildings and installations. While the tendency to confirm the previously acquired tourist gaze emerges from photographs of Hong Kong cityscapes emphasising dramatic views, heights and buzz.

With the advancement of the experience, the narrative of Hong Kong becomes more realistic. In fact, the role of the resident student is introduced in this phase. Ego-enhancement and impression management become less important, obligations are more pressing and most importantly the participants display a stronger ownership over their daily life in the destination. The ambassadorship in this phase gives space to negative comments, and for the admission of acculturative failures. Visually, this transition translates into increased focus on less mainstream, more detailed and more off-the-beaten-path sights of Hong Kong. Photographs of natural landscapes and urban details emerge and the participant increasingly portrays the self as engaged in activities.

Amber provides another good example of communication about negative aspects. She really liked her excursions to Lamma and Cheung Chau Islands, but regrets that Lamma Island was not clean, that there was garbage on the beach, which to her makes it "not so appealing". In this instance Amber makes space for a not so positive comment, over something that is important to her. Hence, narratives about Hong Kong, as the experience proceeds, become holistic, including the city's contradictions, such as, in this instance, signs of Hong Kong's notable waste crisis (Robson, 2017).

Visually, in this phase Amber proposes a photograph that portrays an unusual situation in Hong Kong. She shared a shot of a corner of the city, particularly Mong Kok. According to Amber "This is a small part of the city but I like it. [...] It's a little bit of a lie, cause there are not so many people there in the photo... but it shows a little bit of it you know? The buzz in nightlife... and the one person, just the one person...". The photo provides an alternative glance of an area of Hong Kong that is notably crowded and busy. That element of isolation and of calm, the single person in the street, and the fact that it is a little bit of a lie (because it is rather the exception) are what makes this photo to be shared. It is representative of how

participants grow appreciation for unusual atmospheres of Hong Kong (such as calm) and develop a keener eye over the city.

In fact, probably the most interesting aspect of Hong Kong ambassadorship as the experience advances is the change brought about by saturation with certain aspects of life in the destination. Some participants may start to give more space in their narratives to negative connotations. Others acknowledge difficulties in accommodating to the city life, the hustle and bustle, the crowds and the fast-paced walking. These were aspects that at the beginning were yes acknowledged, but still narrated simply as observations, and anticipated as issues they would "get used to". Interestingly from the narrative perspective, that participants all seem to reach a point in which they *need to get out of there* and enjoy a peaceful atmosphere and some natural environment. At this point, the Hong Kong narrative praises places like the islands, mountains and seaside and activities such as hiking, cycling and swimming at the beach, but also the language and the vernacular of the conversations about Hong Kong starts giving space to discussions of negative aspects.

Iris recalls this moment when recollecting and pondering her past experience in Hong Kong. She had been asked if she felt that Hong Kong suited her personality and the lifestyle she wished to carry out:

"I think in the end Hong Kong is a little bit too busy for me and too many people, so at some point I got very frustrated, for example when I was in the MTR or just walking to the campus, like during rush hours when there are so many people, and everyone walks so slowly, and then I just got the feeling that I needed to get away from there" (Iris, fourth interview).

The navigation of less mainstream attractions and the need to unplug are often combined in their narratives. For example, Jasper tells us

"I thought it was gonna be a lot of more like flats and buildings... but I've seen like so much nature like around the city... many parks..."

[About the ten thousand Buddhas monastery] "I really like it, it's so peaceful..." [third interview]

At different times of the conversation with the researcher, participants highlight the positivity of peacefulness, quietness and the absence of crowds. This is the result, from the point of view of the narrative, of the participants' saturation with the opposite characteristics of the city. As the exchange students need to compensate for aspects of Hong Kong that are stressors, the same city responds with easy access to open and peaceful places. Therefore Hong Kong is able to satisfy the need for escape that Hong Kong itself causes. Bart, at the fourth interview, when questioned about what was his favourite spot in the past month:

"Sai Kung! and there is a beach, a beautiful beach, and then the good thing about this is that there were not many people, because all the tourist attractions in Hong Kong are crowded by people so... even though it's good we can see... I think is a good place and a calm place".

Saturation is not only with regard to aspects of life in the destination that are completely dependent on the city of Hong Kong and its structure, but also saturation with regard to established relationships starts emerging. For example, Jasper

"I was like, five people, five or six people, everyone want kind of to go somewhere else, so we changed our minds like four times, we went in twice actually we sat down, they gave us some water and we walked out again. I felt so bad, you know! Like, everyone just keeps changing their minds, I am like just eat you know! It doesn't matter! That's like very difficult to plan sometimes, the meals." [interview three].

The advancing of the experience also corresponds with the reality that exchange students have exhausted the mainstream attractions and destinations in Hong Kong and have started to explore what they consider the local, real and authentic Hong Kong. On this basis exchange students may be viewed as occupying a place within Cohen's Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences which considers authenticity (Freestone & Geldens, 2008). Nadia provided an example, at the third interview. She manifests security in discerning between the touristy and the authentic Hong Kong as she narrates why she prefers Jordan over Hong Kong island:

"I: so the thing that you like about Jordan is that it's lively?

N: yeah, lively yeah, and there's the markets and then there's the good food places and it's not that like... how do you say when here is like... in the island is more expensive everything... I think it's more the real like local Hong Kong place." [third interview]

There were of course exceptions to the normal trend of going from navigating the most touristy spots of the destination to the less mainstream. For example, in the cases where the participants received VFR the main tourist attractions were often (re)visited and shown to their family and friends.

While saturation could be seen as a negative aspect of the experience, it is also accompanied by the feeling of having settled, which is a positive state of mind in the acculturation process. The researcher's aim was to unearth how students were reconfiguring the Hong Kong experience to their own preferences by establishing practices. Hence how they reconfigured the narrative about Hong Kong based on established rituals and routines and on aspects of life in Hong Kong that have become familiar. The longitudinal approach helped to pinpoint when participants' narratives of Hong Kong reflected a more stable experience of the place. Through routines, habits and rituals in terms of places to go to and

activities to undertake, the exchange students ingrain Hong Kong the place into Hong Kong the juncture in their lives (the student exchange period). Constructing Hong Kong narratives becomes a way for students to *own* Hong Kong and to narrate it based on how they lived it. For example, Janine narrates of her experiences shopping, how she liked to go by herself and walk in the narrow streets, full of small shops, in the chaotic atmosphere. Iris's way of experiencing Hong Kong involves accommodating the demands of her job from her origin country. As a freelancer while on exchange, Iris finds *her Hong Kong* in Sheung Wan, where she goes to sit in cafes, sometimes with a friend, and to get work done. Another interesting example is the narrative given by Xioadi right before departing from Hong Kong. She anticipates that she will miss Hong Kong, but what is interesting is that the acknowledgement of that anticipated nostalgia came to her when leaving the place she had grown the most accustomed to: the library.

"But last night I spent in the library, after I walked out I realized that I will miss here so much because I realised that I won't stay here anymore. […]

When I walk on the footbridge I suddenly started missing my time in the library." [fifth interview].

Hence for Sharon *her Hong Kong* is in the practice of spending time in the library, working on her projects, having access to many more books and materials in English compared to home.

The fact that exchange students' stay is sufficient for them to reach saturation point, pushes them to offset that overwhelming feeling. As previously explained, new ways of navigating the destination are triggered. In most cases, students at this point appreciate that there are alternatives to the busyness and the crowds within Hong Kong. It is therefore thanks

to the need to pursue something that will break the routine, that allows them to appreciate Hong Kong's variety.

As Georgia puts it:

"I think there are two type of places in Hong Kong. One is more commercial, is more suitable for shopping, and I like shopping, so sometimes I may go to some crowded or very commercial places to shopping. And one type is about island, or the mountain, or the harbour, I also like!" (Interview 3).

Unsurprisingly, the acculturation processes triggered by different activities and habits are based on cultural or lifestyle differences. Whether the participant develops saturation or tolerance towards them depends on his/her personal characteristics and the chosen negotiation strategy. It was no surprise that differences with the home environment capture the exchange students' attention and spark negotiations between origin and local culture. But it was interesting from the point of view of ambassadorship to observe how they enter the participants' narrative of Hong Kong and how eventually they change the narrative over time. Differences from the home culture and lifestyle enter the narrative by virtue of being either attention catching or a relevant part of the students' daily life. Take for example Mainland China students. Their narrative of Hong Kong includes the favourable living conditions in the dorm. Mainland Chinese students come across more studious than the other participants, and spend a relevant amount of time in the students' accommodation. Therefore, their Hong Kong narrative makes space for that aspect and its comparison with the home environment. Rooms are bigger than previously, they shared with less people and they had more freedom (Chinese University dorms have separate outdoor bathrooms, shut down the lights at 11 pm and often have four students sharing one room at a time). To western culture students, these living conditions are something hard to get used to. In the narrative of the former, the living

conditions in Hong Kong may emerge as positive, while for the latter it sparks an appreciation of the living environment in the origin country. For example, in Janine's words:

"When I go back I think I will definitely appreciate everything I have, like a big house, the car, no traffic jams, no transports." [fourth interview].

From the sentence above and given that this statement is taken at the time of the fourth interview, it can be inferred that to Janine the difference has yes, entered the routine and she has become accustomed to it, but in the sense that she feels saturation towards the lack of space. On the other hand, Mainland Chinese students will include comments on the comfort of the accommodation only in the first phases of the exchange, growing familiar with it. Another element that may reconfigure narrative throughout the exchange is the return from other travels. This allows for comparison of Hong Kong against other destinations, and for changes to the narrative during the exchange period.

For example, as Nadia comes back from her trips to Taiwan and to Japan, she says:

"[A]fter this Taiwan trip, when I came back, after I entered the HK express MTR I was like, yeah I am back in Hong Kong... the people are... different.

I: in what way?

N: rude? I think I said to you before... they are self-centred, don't wanna talk that much and just like "me! me! me!". But in Taiwan even if they don't speak English, they try and they try to help you. They are polite even if they don't want to be they don't show it to you, and you feel welcome there. And even in the MTRs people go lining up to the escalators. Like they really... if they see there is a line they really go at the end of the line they don't try and push to the..." [Fourth interview]

"I: do you feel that like over time... are you like tired of Hong Kong or sort of looking forward to go home?

N: No, I am not tired of Hong Kong, maybe just all the things I missed from home? and i got my internship in Finland so I am looking forward to that as well but still when i will be back in Finland I will miss here, I am sure of that. Because after a while it will be boring to be... like only weekends you can go to the club and the club is not that good. Or, you can't go out to eat like here, it's more expensive, you need to plan it out. Or then, they just don't do these things they do here. But on the other hand I miss making my own food, like buying all the vegetables at the store and cooking for me and... I guess i can't do it here. So maybe i am ready for it to be over bbut on the other hand sad because i will miss my friends here. And I won't be seeing them, so...” [Nadia, fourth interview]

Another turning point in the ambassadorship of Hong Kong is represented by the participants' engagement in travels outside the destination. In fact, as the exchange students travel to other destinations in Asia (or even Europe) the ambassadorship of Hong Kong becomes permeated with comparisons. Mostly, the consequences affect aspects of acculturation to Hong Kong. For example, Nadia compares Taiwan with Hong Kong. Her opinion of Taiwan is generally very positive, and the elements that emerge are the fact that people in Taiwan mostly speak English or at least try hard. This is relevant considered that in previous narrative occasions Nadia had pointed out that Hong Kongers often do not speak English, and when they do not they simply dismiss her and do not want to carry on the conversation. As the researcher will explain more thoroughly with regard to narrative analysis, such cultural negotiations are interesting in that they involve not only negotiation between participants' own original culture and that of the travel destination, but consequently also between these two and Hong Kong's culture. Hong Kong's narrative inevitably becomes intertwined with the thoughts, actions and results of the negotiation between the three cultures.

Finally, the end of the experience marks another change in the Hong Kong ambassadorship. This is particularly evident in the last interviews before returning home and in the interviews carried out after the experience. The exchange student role re-emerges as dominant when participants are faced with the demands of their networks back at home. The expectation that they should know Hong Kong well and be able to provide insiders' tips shapes the way they talk about the destination. But it is their inner personal experience of (anticipated) return that influences significantly ambassadorship. This is particularly evident in visual narratives, where compositional choices suggest a sense of closure and of nostalgia. In terms of verbal narrative, the communication about Hong Kong emphasises it as an emotional space, to which participants want to attribute a positive connotation. It is also evident in the verbal narrative that most students could perceive to have grown in terms of intercultural competence, tolerance, confidence and coping abilities. While character change was mostly welcome as a positive one, it was also overshadowed by the apprehension of re-entry and the fear of having to renegotiate "fitness for purpose in the origin culture" (Brown & Holloway, 2008). This aspect was definitely confirmed in the current study. In addition, because the researcher paid particular attention to the construction of narratives about Hong Kong, it emerged that communication about Hong Kong advanced in this period is less likely to change considerably in the future, but also more likely to be positive. In fact, students are memorializing the experience, and the trend is to pack it into a positive story, a jack-in-the-box to tell anecdotes, anticipated positive memories and representations of self.

The resulting ambassadorship of Hong Kong and its ability to incorporate both positive and negative aspects is well represented by Iris's narrative:

"I would say that Hong Kong is a place where there is something happening all the time. It's like a very good place for like foreign people to go to since there is a lot […] even if you would travel there alone or for work or something is really easy to meet people there.

Also, what I was saying before it's like most people think about Hong Kong as just a big city and just about the whole city life but then there is also like nature and lot of opportunities to go hiking and go outdoors which was also surprising for me and one major thing which was really really kind of left a mark in my heard and is the reason why I like Hong Kong so much.

I think one negative, major negative side, is like the crazy bureaucracy in many things. Even though Hong Kong itself is so modern and so on, there are so many things that I feel are still old fashioned and like traditional way of doing things and a lot of paperwork and like, I also saw it in the university that there is many things that you can't do for example online and that you have to do it in person." (Iris, Interview 4 – already returned home because of an accident happened in Thailand).

Similarly, Shellie's description of Hong Kong given at the end of her exchange:

"People here are much busier than the people in the mainland, you know? I don't remember if I have ever told you about that one of the classmates here she said that the prosperity of Hong Kong here is actually the pressure. Is actually the pressure of Hong Kong. She thinks that the pressure behind the prosperity is so big that many people can't really enjoy their life in Hong Kong. In my eyes, if people liked their work here or liked to... or really liked this fast life speed and then they can actually enjoy such pressure. For me I really enjoy such pressure because with this pressure I will not feel bored." (Interview 5).

5.5.1.1 VFR: sharing personal preferences and seeing Hong Kong with the eyes of who is not there

It is also interesting to understand how exchange student relationships, both in the destination and in the origin country, shape what they share verbally and visually about the destination on social media. The researcher has previously discussed how the social circle, common interests and the lifestyle established in the destination are important factors to

understand with regard to how exchange students navigate Hong Kong. These will likely determine the places they chose to visit, but are also important in the construction part of the narrative, where they select what to share about Hong Kong and choose a register.

The way students will share *their own* Hong Kong with VFR is also connected with their perception of Hong Kong as an emotional place. Different sites and neighbourhoods assume value based on what they meant for the exchange student.

Shellie exemplifies this point pretty well:

"And once I even joke with my German teammate and I told her that next time if our friends come to Hong Kong and the place I like to show him or her is Sham Shui Po, although it's not tourist attraction, but now it means a lot to me [her teammate and Shellie spent much time there looking for materials for their design coursework].

I have so many memories of the kind of happy time when I find the things I want or when I got totally lost in so many different shops, so that means a lot to me now." (Interview 4).

On the other hand, the relationships from which they are apparently momentarily disconnected, because physically far from them, also influence the construction of the narrative. Take for example Amber, and the strong attachment to her mother. It has been shown how the selection of places to narrate and pictures to share were dictated by the thought that her mother would enjoy them. Visitors often have in their mind the point of view of the people close to them, and somehow see the destination with their eyes.

Another aspect that is interesting is how exchange students have more opportunities to select favourite activities and decide which are more representative to them of Hong Kong. These will be the ones shared with their visiting friends and relatives. For example, Amber loves dining experiences, and has experienced many different ones in Hong Kong. Hong

Kong-style French toast is her favourite, and she wants the other exchange students to share this pleasant local delicacy with her.

Visiting friends and relatives sometimes change destination ambassadorship directly by determining the way exchange students navigate the destination. This means that rather than being an opportunity for exchange students to perform their own narrative of Hong Kong, VFR influences the process prior to ambassadorship, by determining the triggers for acculturation and relationship processes. Let's take the example of Heather, our Korean exchange students. She explains how she had to figure out things to show and to do when she had a friend visiting with her parents.

"I had to introduce [her to] another place because I living here just for two months and i don't know where about it but I had to go travel with her so i had to introduce some good place and she was like everything was perfect so it was good."

Thanks to this visit, Heather went to new places in Hong Kong, such as Lantau island, and to some new cafes. The portion above also highlights how strongly the role of exchange student is felt. Heather says that she "*had to introduce some good place*". She was concerned about not being able to share interesting sights and not being able to please her friends. In fact, she reinforces how the positive feedback from her friend was the confirmation that she did well and "*so it was good*".

Similarly, VFR becomes an opportunity to share first time visits to attractions and sites that the exchange students already had intentions to see or go to. For example, Janine and Amber wanted to visit Disneyland, but waited to go until their FR visited. Jasper made of his parents' visit an opportunity too, not only showing them nice places he had been to, but also trying together new things, such as the wetland park.

As clarified by Janine:

"We went to the big buddha, we went to the peak... so just like all the tourist attractions, like I waited for him so we could do them together..." (Interview 4).

The main implication in terms of ambassadorship that emerges from VFR is the role to the fore that is brought by friends and family visiting. The tangible presence of someone that comes with the purpose to explore a new place with them, places exchange students under the perceived responsibility to be good hosts and hence good exchange students in the destination. They feel expected to know the best things to do and see because of the time spent in the destination and because of the expected depth of experience.

When there starts to be less concern for appearing positive and more concern for the satisfaction of needs, disappointments are also voiced, and the narrative of Hong Kong changes. As mentioned in the findings, as the experience proceeds, exchange students start needing more time in the nature and away from the city life. Chosen activities are based on such needs, and when they "don't deliver" this happens:

"Dragon's Back was the best because of the view... and then Lion's Rock... I was so mad when we did that because at the end when we were supposed to get this great view it was just the city, and to me, I wanna see like, nature…".

The implication for theory is that, similarly to what happens for the service industry, destinations are evaluated and promoted based on visitor moods. The advantage for practitioners with regards to exchange students is that, thanks to the length of stay and to the theory about acculturation, they can anticipate the best moments to use the "good mood" and prevent, maybe in collaboration with higher education institutions, what constitutes "bad mood".

Another interesting aspect of Hong Kong narratives is the difficulties that are encountered by participants to balance a willingness to best use their time in this finite

experience and being overwhelmed by both obligations and desires. Until the second data collection episode (the first face to face interview carried out in Hong Kong) students perceive that they will have plenty of time and that they will be relatively free (with the exception of one Chinese student who has a clear focus on academic achievement for the coming semester). Starting from the third interview, right before mid-semester, participants start to manifest a conflict between their plans within the destination and their obligations.

Let's take our Afro-Haitian respondent from the US, Amber. When interviewed for the second time, only a few days after her arrival in Hong Kong, the participant was asked if she had experienced any homesickness. Her response in direct connection with it was brief, while the rest of her account elaborated on the reasons why she had decided to undertake an exchange and to do it in Hong Kong.

"I found myself saying I have to do this without looking back because it's needed and because I wanted to come to Hong Kong so... So no, not so much".

The question about homesickness also unearthed some deep thoughts about Amber and her relationship with her mother. This was an important motivation for her to take up the exchange.

"Yeah, I guess that is one of the reasons why I knew I really needed to do this cause it's unhealthy at some point. Like some... my mother, when I was in high school, she had cancer, and I think after that, after realizing that I could lose her, then I really started clinging on her harder, so I think the distance was necessary for it to be a healthier relationship for me."

It has to be noted that the issue of separation from the family was discussed in a completely different register in the first interview. In fact, when talking via Skype with the interviewer, separation from family was foreseen as a major difficulty she had to face, but there had been no mention of the fact that the participant wanted to put herself through this

challenge for her own personal growth and for the sake on her family relations. In this sense Amber is using narrative about her experience in Hong Kong to analyse facts and relationships back at home from another perspective. In this instance the participant is not only opening up to the interviewer about her (real) reasons to undertake the exchange; but the accounts are also an opportunity to zero in on the ultimate objectives of the exchange in the destabilizing phase of displacement from the home environment and settlement in a new place. The original motivations keep Amber in a growth and learning mind-set. Bits such as "I needed to do this" and "I have to do this without looking back because it's needed" point both to the need for and the ambition of relevant personal change. It was also previously pointed out how the prioritization of personal change was a characteristic of the student exchange role. Hence, in the initial phase of the exchange it is observed that Amber's way of recounting her experience follow the role of the exchange student by emphasising the ability to and the need for cultural learning and personal growth, which also represents a coping mechanism, an important aspect of exchange student psychological acculturation. The interesting consequences in terms of ambassadorship of Hong Kong are that narratives about the place assume a positive connotation. It is what was previously mentioned in results, that makes accounts about Hong Kong focused on differences with the home environment. It is also what gives these differences the positive connotation of learning opportunities, interesting observations and exciting events.

Another interesting observation that emerges clearly from the findings regards dining habits. While it is expected from tourists that they would consume more meals bought from dining outlets, exchange students normally have budget limitations and enough time and tools to cook meals at home. Yet, exchange students in Hong Kong, because of their willingness to try local (cheaper) meals, get accustomed to the very Hong Konger habit of favouring outside

dining to home cooking. Note that Hong Kongers spend more or less 27% of their income on food, of which 17% is spent on dining outlets meals (CENSTATD, 2015).

5.6   The value of exchange student ambassadorships

The research has confirmed what has been argued in the literature review, namely that exchange students provide a great potential for destination ambassadorship but most importantly, that there are turning points throughout the experience that marketers can pay attention to in order to either convey or steer communication to promote about Hong Kong. In the sections below the researcher clarifies the three main reasons why exchange students are suitable destination ambassadors for Hong Kong. Section 5.5.1 discusses how the mind-set associated with the roles serves the purpose of recounting the Hong Kong experience in a positive as well as realistic manner. Section 5.5.2 discusses how the emotional attachment exchange students feel towards their experience in Hong Kong allows for the establishment of an emotional connection on the part of their narratives' audiences. Finally, section 5.5.3 explains how the narrative of Hong Kong is reinforced by a sense of belonging to the exchange student group. Shared foreignness and identification with the exchange student persona encourage these ambassadors to share heart felt stories about Hong Kong, to which they feel connected for life.

5.6.1   Different is interesting, challenging is exciting

To participants, the student exchange clearly has strong travel and leisure priorities. Yet they see these as functional to fulfilling their obligations as exchange students. In their role of exchange students, participants feel expected to demonstrate appreciation of the time in Hong Kong and to be able to make the most of it. They feel expected to approach struggles as opportunities and as learning experiences. In this sense, the exchange student narrative has special social situated-ness. There are two main defining points. First, the qualities associated with the role of exchange students, such as resourcefulness and open-mindedness. Secondly

the anticipated audience of fellow students, families and home institutions who expect to hear about the unfamiliar and how exchange students dealt with it. This seems to change their outlook towards the destination and the demands it poses on their daily life. In fact, as far as the role of exchange student comes to the fore, participants' narratives celebrate the identified cultural differences and challenges, also there where they actually represented major problems. For destination marketers this is important to understand that exchange students advance overall positive communication about the destination at the beginning of their experience, for ego-enhancement reasons. In fact, there is a certain impression management (expression of a desired self-image) throughout the narrative that serves the purpose of the participants to portray themselves as good exchange students.

Hence, there is the implicit understanding on the part of the participant that they have to suit the role of cultural vehicles, of gatherers of experiences, and of adventurous storytellers. Regarding the latter, is important to point out that the narrative's construction is influenced by participants' latent awareness and anticipation that they will be anchors of the destination experience for others. This is an important determinant of the social situated-ness of the narrative's transmission. Let's take the example of Amber. When asked about congruity with the destination, she responds with anticipations of how she will show her family, in particular her nieces, *her own Hong Kong*. The way she lived it, navigated it, the places she expects she will miss the most. Similarly, when asked by the researcher to select the photos they would absolutely want to share with others, respondents often select images of things that they think their audience could not otherwise know about. Representation of what is truly interesting to them and represents their self-image is not in the forefront for participants, but rather they seem to recognize their role of being anchors, and prioritize serving that purpose.

As a result, aspects of the destination experience that would have probably represented a flaw of the place in the eyes of a tourist are, in the eyes of exchange students, opportunities

to challenge themselves. It goes without saying, that as a natural consequence, exchange students also understand these aspects better than would be the case for a tourist. The consequence is exchange students' perceived need to recount the experience as worthy, memorable and to be cherished. Such "Exchange Filter" supports the arguments that exchange students are suitable ambassadors for positive communication about Hong Kong. They feel a necessity to find the positive things in the experience, they seem to want to prove successful adjustment to themselves and to their audiences and mention problems solely towards the end or if activated by the researcher. This is particularly true for social media communication, as opposed to communication advanced verbally and in private conversations. Shellie exemplifies this point:

"Most of them [social media posts] are positive you know? I don't want my friends know some pessimistic aspects of Hong Kong or the difficulties I come across here. I only want them know the positive part and let them know that oh I had a really great experience here and I learned a lot, I enjoyed my life here and that's all, you know. [..] I don't mind whether I will come across with some difficulties but I just don't want my friends, parents or teachers to know that.

I: who would you let them know? Who would you talk about your difficulties with?

Z: My father." (Interview 3).

Below are two examples of how struggles are reported in a way that upholds participants' identification with the role of exchange student and therefore shows positive attitudes towards the negative aspects or difficult moments of the destination experience.

In the words of Shellie:

"And that day is Saturday and before the Chinese new year. And we worked from 9 am until the 8 pm, all day working and we are talking, we say how our... how have the people

assembled redesigned those toys and then we had a lot of laughter and then we really enjoy it, at last our teacher let us lie our toys are made and stand in a line and asked us to play with them and make some critics about them. I think learned a lot from that. It's really interesting compared with... it's really more interesting compared with going to Disneyland or the ocean park and just spent the normal holiday like most people." [third interview]

The above excerpts is also representative of how the Chinese participants' personal characteristics made them focus on the academic aspect of their role of exchange students.

Another example is given through Sharon's narrative of her visit to a darker side of Hong Kong:

"I think it's somewhere very near to the factory, is called industrial development building, […] So it's quite old. And I know there are still some undeveloped places in Hong Kong. Yep, but I don't mind that. As long as there are rich people there will be poor people. So I just regard it as a kind of experience.

Though it may seem plain to other people, to me it's also kind of experience. Sometimes I just enjoy traveling or walking on the streets with no specific purpose, just like to feel possibly the taste of the city. Whether it's a noisy place or a quite place, developed or underdeveloped. 'that place is not nice!'… But I just treat it as an experience." [fifth interview]

The first apparent benefit of exchange student destination ambassadorships is that their destination experience is more comprehensive than occurs for most other visitors. This point was made in the literature review based on the duration of their stay, but it emerges from the data that it is also because of the social cohesiveness with other exchange students and with the need to prove themselves as good exchange students that they are more resourceful and force themselves to see more and different things. In fact, congruity is often displayed as

congruity with the exchange students' persona, rather than with the exchange students' personality. Participants see the place as a good fit, because it's good for themselves in their role of exchange students. For example, Georgia argues:

"J: I think Hong Kong is the place for me to live for the short term but not to the long term because I think the life here for me is not very [] than before. I think maybe after the life can be more healthy. Just for the food, or my sleeping or something other. But I think it's a place suitable for me to experience for a while and the culture here I think, the quick pace here, can give me the motivation to, you know, have culture of maybe kind of working or when I need to do something I can contribute to myself, or devote myself absolutely." [third interview]

As a result, Hong Kong is depicted as a destination offering a diversity of things, atmospheres, activities and opportunities. The contrasts between the dense cityscapes and the natural landscapes are evident not only in the visual narrative promoted by exchange students through social media, but also in oral accounts of their navigation of the destination. In particular, what strikes are views and attractions that convey peace and nature, as this often come as an unexpected contrast against the organic image previously held of the city.

[Jasper] "[T]his is one of my favourite pictures like [Showing his favourite Hong Kong Skyline photograph]... the skyline, all the lights from the buildings reflecting into the water... like without Photoshop, you know, like natural, it's pretty cool!" (Interview 3)

5.6.2   Hong Kong as an emotional space

As was briefly mentioned during the descriptions of the organizational categories, exchange student narratives about Hong Kong often overlap or share blurred lines with narratives of the student exchange experience. Hence in participant Hong Kong's narratives, the destination's physical space and the emotional space of the student exchange are

intertwined and integrated into a unique entity. The place name Hong Kong is used in these instances not to denote the city per se, but rather the place of life of the study period abroad. The implication is that an exchange student that is a positive advocate of the student exchange is implicitly ambassador of the destination where this has occurred.

The narrative of Korean students demonstrates the point well. When prompted to talk about Hong Kong, these students talked about Hong Kong as the time of their freedom from academic and family obligations, and the time-span of their life for opportunities to tick things off their life-bucket list. These responses are consonant with the place-name-brand equivalence introduced above, whereby the name of the place is understood as containing everything about the brand perception of the place itself (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, 2011; Kotler et al., 1993). They point out to how the narrative about Hong Kong inevitably becomes a hybrid, made of the meaning the overall Hong Kong experience had for the students' lifetime perspective, the anticipated memory (to the point that students actually want to make memories) of such timeframe of their life and the factual experience. Narrative of Hong Kong evolves beyond being merely about a geographical entity, to become narrative of an emotional place. This is in line with previous literature that interpreted the student exchange as a rite of passage to adulthood because it is associated with the redefinition of the student's identity and of his/her social membership (Grabowski et al., 2017).

The participants' tendency to use the place name Hong Kong to denote the place and the student exchange interchangeably is also palpable through the responses participants give to questions regarding perceived congruity. In fact, when the interviewer asked about the perceived congruity between the place Hong Kong and participants' personality, often the exchange students responded by narrating the way the exchange fit their personality, or the way Hong Kong fits the essence of the exchange. Exemplary in this sense is Nadia's response when asked whether she thought that Hong Kong was a good place for her. She said:

"I think it's good for me, it challenges me somehow, like I cannot look my temper so easily with the people like in the MTR some stuff and then also I need to be more independent, try to find places and like talk in front of the class and get to know like more people, there is no way I can be just by myself so... I think it's good for me, really good place...

I: so you prefer not to be alone, and to be always around people?

N: oh no! No! Sometimes I need time for myself but it's also a way, like, if I just go and take MTR somewhere I can be somehow alone cause there is no questions and then if I just go to my room I think it's also a way to be alone... so... I can find a way for that. But it's... this is very good experience for me... I am happy I chose the place... In Europe it would have been maybe too easy for the culture..." [third interview].

While Nadia with her words attributes the satisfaction of her personal needs to Hong Kong as a destination, it is implicit that this congruity is rather due to her being a temporary resident here, and of being by herself here. First, in this excerpt Nadia interprets Hong Kong's congruence with her personality in terms of the personal growth stimulated by the demands of living in the place. This is representative of the exchange students' role practice of narrating the experience from a learning perspective. Secondly, the congruence between her identity and the place is attributed to aspects that are not so much intrinsic to Hong Kong as a place as much as they are archetypal of a student exchange. Hence, once again the place name Hong Kong triggers a narrative that conceptualizes Hong Kong as the student exchange rather than the destination. The place name Hong Kong is inextricably tied to the student exchange as an important juncture in their lives. It is conceptualized not as a destination per se, but as *the* student exchange geographical and emotional place.

Georgia, when questioned about what does she tells others about her life in Hong Kong, responds:

"I think the environment here just in terms of me I think it makes me, you know, play, have fun, be with friends and very happy. And on the other hand I can, you know, when I need to have project I can work very hard. I think life here both have the calm place here and there is the crowded place here for sure, both." [third interview]

Once again, the narrative of Hong Kong is rather the narrative of the student exchange. Georgia here describes Hong Kong in terms of a place that makes her want to both spend time on leisure and making more friends, and on working on her academic commitments. It is hardly arguable that these are aspects unique to Hong Kong as a place, but they are rather attributable to the structure of the student exchange in general and to its purposes.

Other participants are mindful and more explicit about the fact that their feelings towards Hong Kong are mediated by the student exchange. Ronald, for example, reasons on the perceived congruity between his personality and what Hong Kong represents. He is aware that his feelings towards and relationship with Hong Kong are mediated by the mindset of being on an exchange.

"I: Does Hong Kong feel right for you, for the personality you have? [hesitation in his response, I rephrase] Do you feel Hong Kong is the right place for you to stay in?

R: uhm... yes I think so. But honestly I don't think it's just Hong Kong. Lately I feel I just like being around people. At first I was really introvert and I would stay the whole day into my room and stuff like that. But since I have much time to go out more, I think even if it was Hong Kong or any other place, I feel this kind of atmosphere where like... actually is the fact that I am an exchange student, that I like it a lot. If I came here just by myself... It would have been great, but I think being an exchange student makes it much better, cause actually it

gives the chance to meet other exchange students and do things together and go travel together... so... I think it's the fact that I am an exchange student in Hong Kong that makes me like it."

Similarly, once the experience of the exchange in Hong Kong is concluded, this ambivalence of Hong Kong as geographical and emotional place is marked. The researcher asked Bart what he thought was unique of Hong Kong. His response:

"Bart: The food.

Cristina: The food.

Bart: Yeah. I hate the food in Hong Kong but sometimes I miss it.

Cristina: Okay, that's interesting. […] Why do you think that you miss it even though you don't like it?

Bart: Because sometimes I miss the time when I was there and, yeah, just like the symbol. I miss the food and I miss the time at that time. I think that kind of things, I think so."

In this instance as well the participant is aware that nostalgia for Hong Kong is related to what it represented in the context of his personal life rather than to the intrinsic characteristics of the place.

Narratives of Hong Kong as a diversion from the normal life obligations are other examples of how Hong Kong is narrated as a place in life that participants will live only once. In fact, Hong Kong is often associated with a feeling of freedom. While this feeling is transferred to the city's brand name, it really belongs to the student exchange. In this sense, representative are the comments of the Korean students on how Hong Kong to them represents a break from academic and family pressures. Similarly, some of the Chinese students see it as a moment to hit "pause" on worries that concerned them back at home. Georgia, for example, says:

"Because when we are in year four we all need to decide you know what way we have to take. But now I haven't decided and I haven't you know resolved something.

I: you still have time for that?

J: yeah... I think when I come back to Nanjing I need to decide and... but during this time I not worry about to decide right now. I still have time to think." [third interview]

The two Korean participants seem especially concerned with the liminality of the experience, as Bart explains:

"I: how do you feel now about the lifestyle in Hong Kong?

B: I think my mind has not changed... I like that at first the attitude is like passive... times is coming to go back to Korea, we think we don't have much time to stay here so we think that time is precious here. Cause we think that most of the Korean students go back to Korea, work part time job or some internship, they work hard in Korea, so it's the only time to enjoy them when they are here. So they start to think that this time is a very precious thing".

This excerpt by Bart came in response to questions about the lifestyle in Hong Kong. It was previously explained to him that by that the researcher intended to investigate habits, rituals and the way he navigates the place and his impressions of Hong Kong's perosnality. What emerges strongly is the liminality of the exchange experience in relation to the anticipated return home. The end of the *Hong Kong Era* puts pressure on the Korean students because of the expectation to have to go back to a much harder lifestyle, but it also enhances the appreciation of this time. Hence, besides being an instance of how participants use the place name Hong Kong to refer to the life place exchange, this is also another example of how exchange students' narrative assumes positive connotations because of their willingness to make the most of their stay.

5.6.3   Belonging to the exchange student group

The study is largely consistent with previous findings that establishing relationships with host nationals promotes adaptation, particularly by contributing to the individual's acquisition of host communication competence (Kim, 2001). Yet it has been found that establishing such friendships is difficult (Sam, 2001) and represent a relatively small part of the participants' social environment. Limited socialization with Hong Kong locals is not necessarily a sign of a flawed acculturation process. Hong Kong is a unique location for its pluralistic and multicultural environment, and it may simply put less pressure on international students' to conform to the host culture's norms, compared with other Asian destinations (Kim, 2001). Participants' narrative about the acculturative demands and stresses seem to confirm this view. Hong Kong is depicted as a place where the origin culture is available, hence exchange students' motivation to engage in negotiations with the local culture can be switched on and off.

On the other hand, participants confirm previous literature's findings arguing that reasons for not socializing with locals can be attributed to language proficiency, discrimination or the fact that locals have already established and formed friendship networks (Woolf, 2007). In the current study these aspects affect the narrative of Hong Kong and of Hong Kongers. They also accentuate the shared foreignness felt by exchange students in the place. Although it has to be pointed out that, where host national relationships are successfully established, they acquire a strong value for the exchange students and are narrated positively, almost with an amplifying effect on the overall local community. Yet, besides the important effects on ambassadorship, it emerges clearly here that socialization with locals proved difficult for all the students, in fact the locals that did socialize with exchange students were the same persons for several interviewees. Multi-national friendships are based on a common bond of being foreigners in the host country and yields the benefits of

leaving international students with friends from all over the world and of learning about cultures others than that of the destination country.

Another interesting finding of this research has implications regarding the role of socialization in international students' acculturation to Hong Kong. It was discussed in the literature review that previous research found that international students that socialize more with host nationals encountered less acculturation problems. Previous literature also found that, while the host nationals' social support network grows in size, its depth may not, leading to the inability for exchange students to gain the host culture's social support (Bertram et al., 2014). This research partially confirms the latter, as it unearthed a third type of social group: peer exchange students. While not co-nationals, and often actually from far apart cultures, exchange students find social support in each other because of their situational reality of shared foreignness and for being in the same contingent reality of a unique period of their life-time.

Though Hong Kong is an international city, the vast majority of its population is ethnically Chinese and Cantonese constitutes the most widely spoken language. In addition, by law, 80% of the spots available at the UGC funded Universities in Hong Kong have to be destined to Hong Kong local students. This means that overall the prevalence of international students at the undergraduate level is limited. Exchange students clearly notice to be in the minority, and the cohesiveness of the local students exacerbates the exchange students' shared sense of otherness in which they find belonging with other exchange students. Such shared foreignness plays an important role in the construction of narratives about Hong Kong. In particular, with regard to the meaning born by the *we* and the *they*. In the previously discussed physical-emotional space that is the Hong Kong exchange, narratives reflect the social experience of individuals that found belonging among the exchange students and otherness in the local students. This finding is in line with previous studies whereby

international students at urban campuses were found to report significantly lower identification with the home culture, lower acculturation to the host culture but also less social adjustment issues (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). In fact, the social adjustment here seems to be provided by the third culture, the exchange students' culture.

Therefore, the support that acculturation researchers try to encourage between guests and hosts, was found between guests themselves. Exchange students in this study all confirmed the expectations to value new social relationships (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). The interviews seem to point out to the students' development of a so-called global citizenship. This is visible in the shift of the scale of social affiliations from national towards more global forms of belonging (Grabowski et al., 2017), such as in references to westerners, exchange students, travellers, etc.

The shared foreignness brings exchange students together at the beginning of the experience. But later it also becomes the basis of how participants live the destination. In fact, friendships established in Hong Kong have the ability to prime the way they experience, negotiate and communicate about Hong Kong. Clearly friendships also determine what is worth seeing in the destination, hence influencing the selection of activities to be undertaken, and what is worth remembering. Considering that most of the participants selected other exchange students as companions for their stay, the social situated-ness of belonging to the third culture of exchange students is both the consequence and the cause of acculturative demands in Hong Kong.

The third culture of peer-exchange students and the sense of belonging to this group has strong consequences in terms of Hong Kong ambassadorship. The researcher focused on principles of brand relationships that will now be useful to explain what happens when exchange students narrate Hong Kong. It was discussed above how consumers are more likely to feel strongly about brands that are associated with a reference group, and about

reference groups congruent with their aspirational selves (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). It was also explained how brand relationships are means for consumers to play out projects, concerns and themes that they identify by. Identification was defined as a feeling of oneness towards the human aggregate, regardless of whether the individual is its formal or symbolic member (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Individuals try to fulfil self-verification needs by seeking consistency with their self-concept and brands associated to aspirational groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

The sense of belonging to a group of peer exchange students is important from an ambassadorship point of view because of the motivations it may provide. First of all, the sense of belonging to "something bigger" can encourage affection and connection to the destination (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013). The literature review also pointed out that ambassadors are motivated by the benefits of participating in a network, such as accessing first-hand information regarding the place (here provided for example through the University led activities), attending events and meetings, making new contacts and establishing new relationships (Andersson & Ekman, 2009; Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013).

In this study it has emerged clearly through the fact that ES value the opportunity of being part of the student exchange phenomenon that the motivators towards promoting Hong Kong come rather from the sense of belonging to this human aggregate than from the place itself.

The sense of belonging to the exchange students' group has another important implication, and namely the way it affects destination relationship. To understand this concept we have to recall consumer acculturation and discuss how roles affect it. By asking exchange students to narrate their habits, routines and activities, the researcher unearthed the exchange students' consumer behaviour. Given that the focus is the destination Hong Kong, exchange students' consumer behaviour corresponds with the navigation of the destination.

Consumer acculturation is the process of acquiring the necessary value, skills and knowledge to engage in consumer behaviour in a new culture (Penaloza, 1989, p. 110). Students may exhibit different consumer behaviours based on the chosen acculturation strategy (Vijaygopal & Dibb, 2012). Once again it is interesting to find that exchange students to Hong Kong acquire a hybrid consumer behaviour, which is not simply the trade-off between their origin and the host culture, but a result of the blends of all the cultures. This is nicely instantiated by Amber:

"There are so many [coffee] brands i am discovering... it's nice about having other exchange students to cause we could go to a mall and be like oh this spanish brand, this french brand and i am like i've never heard of this before and they're like, yeha it's good quality and... i fall in love with things i'll never find again." [Third interview]

The sense of belonging to the exchange students' group also has implications for sense of place. This concerns the meanings and values attached to it by those whose place it is, and is based on the awareness of the place atmosphere, habits and communal practices (Campelo et al., 2014). It was also conceptualized as *genius loci*, specifically "the shared sense of the spirit of the place" Campelo et al. (2014). The researcher had previously suggested that because of the keenness to absorb the local culture and because of the length of stay, exchange students were likely to acquire Hong Kong's sense of place. Such sense of place is a requirement to positive communication about a place. Yet, in light of the ambivalence of Hong Kong in the exchange students' mind as place and period, the researcher here argues something different. The exchange students have yes acquired sense of place, but the sense of the emotional place. That means that exchange students do have a shared sense of Hong Kong, but it does not represent the spirit of the place in its factual connotation, rather it represents the spirit of the student exchange in Hong Kong. Hence, whereby the feeling of

belonging to the reference group of exchange students is strong, it is observed that the narrative of Hong Kong emphasises its narrative as an emotional space.

6   <u>Conclusions and Opportunities for Further Research</u>

Based on the research findings reported in preceding chapters, it has been shown that spontaneous communication by visitors is a valuable asset for destination marketing. On this basis, tourism marketers should assess and monitor their current destination word of mouth (Nyilasy, 2006). This study has adopted an innovative approach by conducting a longitudinal assessment of destination related communications. It has also investigated the way ambassadorship evolves by considering other aspects of the stay abroad, namely acculturation and relationship with a destination.

Ambassadorship of Hong Kong by exchange students has been shown to be *fluid*. Previously, research has looked at ambassadorship and WOM communications as outcomes of an experience. However it has failed to account for the fact that: ambassadorship persists throughout the experience, that the experience changes, and therefore that communications from the same person about the destination can change.

It has been shown that changes in how ambassadors perceive their role change how they communicate about Hong Kong. Hong Kong ambassadorship evolves from communicating fascination and awe, to evoking engagement and sociality, and finally to suggesting nostalgia and memorialization. The example of exchange students has shown the visitors' transition from communicating the place based on the eye-catching and detectable to the experienced and owned over an extended period. This is conveyed visually through emotional appeals based first on awe and fascination and images of the offer type. Photographs progressively evolve to portray engagement and sociality, and finally nostalgia, memorialization and closure. Compositionally this translates into a focus on aspects such as respectively framing, gazing and colors. The evolution of Hong Kong ambassadorship seems to exemplify how, as visitors feel progressively more *native* to Hong Kong, there is a change in the "how" of their descriptions. Interestingly, the changing visual communication on the

part of the students advances experiences that can entice different audiences. For example, the remote and pristine locations of Hong Kong are enticing to Millennials because they represent a differentiation from mainstream mass tourists, and therefore equip them with "bragging rights" (News Bites, 2017; Nisbett & Strzelecka, 2017). The *how* of these descriptions is also enticing, because images are compositionally almost glamorous in the eyes of *socialmedialite* tourists.

Finally, the study evidenced how verbal narrative is closer to the truth than what is communicated through photographs. The researcher described how the verbal narrative of Hong Kong, especially towards the half-way point and the end of the experience, also makes space for negative or frustrating aspects. This is not evident in the photographs of Hong Kong that are shared on social media which primarily portray positive and fascinating aspects of the city.

The study employed the acculturation framework to explain the formation of destination ambassadors. The researcher found that the acculturation framework explained how participants sought wellbeing in Hong Kong through their choice of activities, negotiation of a relationship with and movement around the destination. Yet, acculturation alone could not explain the complex meaning-making process behind the narratives that applied at different points in time.

The findings about the role of acculturation in explaining Hong Kong ambassadorship differed from the previous literature. The researcher had anticipated that successful acculturation (the ability to choose a cultural trade-off that ensures newly found well-being) would translate into positive advocacy for Hong Kong. The findings though have suggested that the success and the extent of acculturation to the place are of limited importance in explaining the tone of the ambassadorship. Successful acculturation does not guarantee positive ambassadorship and unsuccessful acculturation does not guarantee negative

communication. This last point diverges slightly from previous research which concluded that the more educated, such as higher education students, exhibit enhanced acculturation outcomes (Berry et al., 1987). While the premise about level of education holds for exchange students (they are studying at an advanced tertiary level), the imminent prospect of returning home allows them select which dimensions they are willing to acculturate. This was exemplified by how, in their role of resident student, participants found ways to tolerate certain aspects of life in Hong Kong without acculturating to it.

Other conceptual considerations also shape Hong Kong ambassadorship, notably the establishment and development of a relationship with the destination Hong Kong. This related to participants' self-identity at each point in time and how this shaped their acculturation choices. Displacement from familiar environments brings students to a new understanding of themselves (Brown & Holloway, 2008), though such understanding of self also evolves through the experience, influencing the type and extent of their activities.

The current investigation has adopted an original angle to investigate whether tourists seek congruence with their identities. Narratives have been treated as biographical accounts that interconnect with dynamic, and contingent circumstances and are based on the narrators' *fluid* identities (Emmel & Hughes, 2012). The researcher's use of in-depth interviews shed light on the contingent identities, societies of reference and circumstances behind the construction of narratives (Emmel & Hughes, 2012; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). This allowed the researcher to explain the circumstances of destination ambassadorship.

The findings have shown that congruity between personal identity and place not only shapes destination communications, but also choices relating to and culture and to navigating Hong Kong. Identity evidently plays a role both early in the process, and during the ambassadorship transmission phase. The succession of overlapping and aspired identities continuously redefine individual experiences and destination narratives. The study findings

point to the centrality of identity throughout the various processes. Different individuals who share identical experiences feel compelled to uphold different roles – as exchange students, resident students and tourists. These are the three different personas that emerged through the student exchange experience. Participants sought congruity to differing extents and at different times.

By tracing the evolution of participant identities through their experiences, the present study has extended earlier findings about hybrid tourists. Previously, the applicable research noted that an individual may undertake multiple trips, and may belong to different segments across different trips (Boztug, Babakhani, Laesser, & Dolnicar, 2015). The present study has suggested that hybridity may be present within a single travel occasion, at least in the case of longer-stay tourism. The concept of alternating and overlapping identities supports the view that tourist lifestyles are increasingly inconsistent and contradictory. A single individual may engage in contrasting behaviours through a single trip (Brondoni, 2016). Finally, the study findings suggests that destination ambassadorship too is inconsistent throughout the travel experience.

In seeking to explain the emergence of ambassadorship behaviours the researcher attempted to capture *ongoing* story-telling that occurred *throughout* the experience. Previous researchers have recommended analysing tourists' story-telling during their stay to capture the simultaneous construction and transmission of narratives (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010). Narratives could be truly viewed for their contingent and circumstantial premises through such means. The present study has followed this recommendation by adopting a longitudinal approach which has provided methodological soundness and conceptual clarity.

Longitudinality has allowed the researcher to follow how the narrated experience changes, and to understand the changing contingencies of the narrator. Contexts and contingent situations are important in accounting for tourism as an embodied experience and

therefore for ambassadorship through the stream of experience. This research has clarified how construction, retelling and identification change destination narratives. The researcher has explained destination narratives as a process of:

- making sense of the destination

- constructing and transmitting identity

- capturing and transmitting destination images.

By assembling the events relative to acculturation, relationship and ambassadorship at different times during the student exchange, the researcher described the situated narration practices. The researcher note that narratives about the same aspects of the destination vary over time. At different times, participants engage in positive narratives when describing negative aspects and obstacles because these represent interesting and challenging personal growth opportunities. Elsewhere participants referred to the same aspects as negative and irritating. Through such observations the researcher identified the roles that were upheld by participants.

Besides identifying the fluidity of identities and the hybridity of participants' roles, the researcher also uncovered something new about place identification. Based on the literature, it was anticipated that brand advocacy would be connected to identification with the destination and integration within the prevailing society (Bochner, 2006; Mitchell, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). It has previously been shown that travel narratives support the construction of self and the advancement of aspired self-identities to others (Lo & McKercher, 2015; Riessman, 1993, 2008). Ambassadorship behaviours are more prevalent when the brand personality connects with individual identities (Escalas, 2004a). The associated research findings are interesting in two ways. First, ESs identify with the emotional spaces in their lives with the city rather than with Hong Kong as a study

destination,. The "local society" of this emotional place consists of other exchange students who share a similar sense of foreignness. This study has challenged the previous literature by suggesting that communication about Hong Kong is less encouraged by socialization with locals, than by emotional investments in the society of the emotional place, namely the exchange student group.

The connection between the place name "Hong Kong" and the idea of an emotional space is central to the concept of destination marketing. Millennials are particularly responsive to marketing that conveys emotional connections. Ambassadorial advocacy for Hong Kong as an emotional space can illuminate the communication that best convey emotional value. The identity-construction function is also central to the appeal of experiences. This study has found that identification with, and consequent ambassadorship of the destination is strictly related to the acculturation process and to the emergent relationship. Identifying with Hong Kong as an emotional space supports the argument that travel defines the identities of younger tourists, as reflected in the dictum: "you are where you've been" (UNWTO, 2016).

The researcher has argued that destination marketing should focus on lifestyles and on constructing identifiable traveller personas (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2015). Such approaches can "assist marketers to identify and advance identities to which their target audience aspires. The identified compositions may also assist. The current researcher has identified commonplace compositions across different respondents, thereby doing justice to photographs in their capacity as markers of taste and of lifestyles. Tastes, product preferences and ambitioned lifestyles are converging progressively across the world, along with the aesthetic of the photographs through which they are advanced (Brondoni, 2016; Jansson, 2018). These compositions are the "signature" of dominant visual preferences in Hong Kong ambassadorships (Hochman & Manovich, 2013). Even when the portrayed elements are not

synechdochical or characteristic, the composition and aesthetic of the images respond to certain dominant patterns that are worthy of further investigation.

A final foundation of destination ambassadorship is the idea that individuals can provide an anchor for destination brand associations (Aaker, 1991). As the researcher has advanced this observation, it has been noted that the evolving of exchange students is accompanied by changing reference groups, and therefore changes in their audience. By implication, the Hong Kong narratives of exchange students may progressively entice different groups. The initial explorative and positive phase may appeal to new and potential visitors, whereas the middle and third phases, which offer more realistic and in-depth accounts, may resonate better with those who are interested in longer-term residence in Hong Kong, such as other exchange students, international students or even expatriates. Hence, the study confirms the researcher's original contention that ES destination communications are ascribable to their experiences as both tourists and as temporary residents.

Choosing exchange students as the study population and as representative of the Millennial generation supports the emerging commercial logic of marketing. These consumers (and tourists) are both creators of and audiences for marketing content. There is a need for the online presence of travel and hospitality brands to be supported by social proof, brand ambassadors, and user generated content (Wong, 2016). The ubiquity of respondents' online communications in this study reinforces the considerable potential of spontaneously generated communications for destination marketing.

6.1   Theoretical contributions

The current study contributions to tourism scholarship in several ways. It advances knowledge about destination marketing; it deploys a long heralded tourism research method and approach; it considers a population that is of rising interest for tourism scholars; and finally it introduces a rarely employed framework to the tourism field. These are detailed in

the following section. The researcher has also conducted cross-disciplinary research and outlines its applicability to future investigations in terms of approach, method and findings.

As was outlined in the introductory section, the study is situated within the tourism marketing literature and in this context the findings have considerable applicability to destinations. It has been shown that word of mouth communications by exchange students are content rich, realistic and are advanced spontaneously and actively. Exchange student narratives are evidently trustworthy and are an effective promotional tool. This increases the likelihood of their resonance with the networks of individual exchange students. The study also tackled two of the most discussed marketing tools in current research: word-of-mouth and social media. Finally, the study has supplemented the growing literature about online visual destination marketing by employing an unusual angle to the analysis of images, as will be discussed below.

The study has advanced tourism research methodologies by supporting longitudinal and non-representational approaches to investigate destination ambassadorships. Though there is abundant research about WOM communications, narratives, story-telling and other destination communications that are advanced spontaneously by individuals, there has been little to no research on how individual communications present different destination images and address different audiences as the experience develops. The present research has documented the changes over time in terms of ambassadorship.

This latter observation would not have been possible without the adoption of a longitudinal approach. The present circumstances are relevant because there has been minimal research on the *process* of transforming visitors into destination ambassadors. Most previous investigations have concentrated on antecedents and motivations (Andersson & Ekman, 2009; Kemp et al., 2012; Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011), rather than on the *onflow* of the destination experience and resulting ambassadorships.

Adopting a longitudinal perspective to consider the evolving narratives has highlighted an important aspect of travel: the relentlessness of unceasing connectedness. This is particularly true for Millennials with their high expectations about "speed of access to information and feedback" (Veiga et al., 2017, p. 606). The researcher has traced how the evolving exchange student narrative potentially allows marketers to leverage individual communications for multiple marketing purposes.

The contribution to scholarly tourism methods extends beyond the use of longitudinal data. The adopted methodology focussed on the situated-ness of destination communications. The author selected a methodology that allowed her to disclose the unaware, spontaneous and emotional aspects of Hong Kong ambassadorship. In doing this she considered the "local, situated conditions necessary for tolerable, sustainable, shared lives" (Lorimer, 2005). She also deployed non-representational approaches to analyse the visual materials and representational analyses of verbal narrative. This approach accommodated the "automatic and precognitive aspects of market societies as well as the atmospheres and affect that circulate in consumption spaces" (Hill et al., 2014).

The present study has emphasised situatedness; event and interview contexts; the haptic aspects of respondent verbal and visual accounts; and finally the onflow of the destination experience. Following good practice the researcher devised "novel ways to describe and track the distributed world of consumption" (Hill et al., 2014). On this basis she was able to situate narratives and images within the contingent realities while enlivening the sensorial and emotional appeal of destination communications. Hence, the study has advanced tourism scholarship by providing an instance of more-than representational approaches. Finally, the more-than-representational as opposed to the merely non-representational aims, were achieved because the investigation has presented accounts of the non-conscious and affective as well as the reflexive and meaningful in respondent experiences.

The study has focussed on a population of particular interest, namely Millennials with international and exchange students as representatives. They represent the globalised and internationalised mind-set of Millennials and the generation's social media engagement and travel attitudes. The researcher has embraced a prominent suggestion in the industry literature to market to Millennials using emotional appeals and to engage by co-creating marketing content.

The current research has contributed to research on international student mobilities. Labelled as "international academic tourism" (Rodríguez et al., 2012), the applicable literature is scant (Bento, 2014). Most previous research on international student mobilities has adopted an acculturation framework with a substantial component refering to the maladaptive coping strategies of Asian international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Previous studies have explored the overseas study experiences of Asian students (Chen et al., 2015; Kim & Jogaratnam, 2003; King & Gardiner, 2013; Yang, Webster, & Prosser, 2011), and a few others have investigated the experiences of other international students in Asia (Tian & Lowe, 2014; Yu et al., 2014). The present study has researched international students in Asia-Pacific study destinations. By undertaking a qualitative investigation of the experience of international exchange students from a diversity of source different countries, the present research contributes to knowledge by raising awareness about the coping strategies of western students. The study has also addressed calls to adopt more qualitative and longitudinal approaches to understand the acculturation of international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). While previous researchers have investigated the relations between acculturation and consumer brand behaviours (De Juan-Vigaray, Sarabia-Sánchez, & Garau-Vadell, 2013; Vijaygopal & Dibb, 2012), and have applied the acculturation framework to tourism behaviours (Rasmi et al., 2014) and to international students (Rasmi et al., 2009) the use of acculturation to understand brand ambassadorships in the present study is novel.

The researcher has discussed the role of identities in the construction and transmission of ambassadorships. The acculturation literature has recognized personal characteristics and motivations and the purpose of the sojourn as determinants of the acculturation process. Yet, to the researcher's knowledge, no researcher has investigated acculturation processes based on how these elements change through the sojourn, thereby altering the premises of the process. The current study enhances acculturation research by acknowledging the respective roles of dialectical and hermeneutic processes.

It has been shown that fluid identities prompt a continuous updating of acculturation premises, and of acculturation strategies, through a single sojourn. In particular, the study's main point of interest about acculturation is that the identities that are encountered through the sojourn are deeply ingrained within the multiple purposes for sojourning. The student exchange is and has been promoted as a blend of travel, residence and educational programs. The aims of each of these aspects cast participants into all of the related roles through the experience.

The focus on exchange students has provided a novel approach to researching the tourist experience. By using the acculturation framework to understand the unfolding of the destination experience, the researcher has illuminated how visitors navigate and construct a relationship with a destination. The application of the acculturation framework was useful for analyzing destination experiences involving contact with the unfamiliar. It also evidenced the complex evolution of destination ambassadorship, which cannot be explained single-handedly by the acculturation framework. Yet, the researcher built upon the previous acculturation literature by highlighting the fluid identities of acculturating individuals

The preceding findings have potential implications for researchers beyond tourism. International higher education is an important research field. Deploying the acculturation framework has enabled the researcher to uncover exchange student attitudes towards different

events and circumstances throughout the experience. Higher education institutions that receive international students may benefit from such insights to acquire improved understanding of student wellbeing.

It is not uncommon for international higher education researchers to use the acculturation framework to understand the experiences of international students. However, fewer researchers have investigated communications by international students about the destination and their institutions through the course of their stay. This research has provided a detailed exploration the international higher education experience. The longitudinal approach and focus on leisure rather than academic time provides future researchers with a better understanding of student coping mechanisms. There are potential solutions to the issue of stress management that arise from observing students' choice of leisure activities during their stay.

In addition, to the researchers' knowledge, no research has been published at the moment of writing about acculturation in the digital era. The study has evidenced how digital communication technologies have shaped new communication practices. These, in turn, shape not only the forms of destination brand ambassadorship, but also the occasions and contexts of acculturation. In the digital era, individuals have easy access to media and experience pervasive connectedness throughout the tourist experience (especially in the case of tourism in a urban destination like Hong Kong). Millennials in particular, are a digital generation, and in this study the researcher observed their process of acculturation to Hong Kong. As a result, it was found that on the one hand, digital technologies provide exchange students with more opportunities for support from the families back home and with more information to use to navigate the destination as they encounter new things; on the other hand, they keep Millennials connected to their potential audiences, hence explaining the succession of different roles that they have tried to uphold. And it was discussed how, as new

roles emerge, exchange students engage in new attitudes and behaviours (the ABCs) of acculturation.

This emerges as one of the main contributions of this study, a new acculturation framework, in which both the affordances of the new technologies and the identities that they determine are part of the contexts and premises of acculturation processes at different points in time.

Finally, the study also shed light on how the communication about Hong Kong, and hence destination ambassadorship, was shaped by both acculturation and new communication afforded by the digital technologies. The analysis of the visual communication about Hong Kong has emphasised how there is a homogeneous communication style across users. Posts and images have to comply with certain standards and styles (colors, filtering and composition) to emphasise the users' bragging rights, which appeals to socialmedialites. Analysis of tourist-generated communication about a destination cannot ignore the fact that in the digital era tourists are both creators and audience of destination ambassadorship.   The need to uphold a role on social media or even through other digital communication means such as instant messaging shapes the activities undertaken at the destination as well as the way stories are told. Because tourists anticipate their audiences expectations based on their roles, the way their memories are constructed and advanced is affected, and made "instagrammable". Such building component also evidenced some results that came as a surprise, such as the fact that the researcher did not find the greater transparency that was expected based on the consumer behaviour of the persistently connected millennial, probably because of the identity building component. Social media, in fact, worked as the anticipated location of a memory.

Therefore, the findings are also applicable to marketing research, particularly as it relates to Millennials, social media and visual marketing. The contribution about

compositional analysis is also strong. This study has provided a potential standard for future qualitative compositional investigations of aspects relevant to visual materials. As explained previously, an in-depth qualitative analysis of the composition of images is better suited to understanding the affective impact of images compared to bigger scale quantitative studies.

Most previous brand ambassadorship studies have used consumers, employees or visitors as their applicable populations. However few have considered exchange students as potential brand ambassadors. Hence, the present study has constructed a conceptual framework tailored to the exchange student population. The researcher adopted various complementary concepts drawing from diverse literatures. Previous researchers have covered destination brand advocacy and positive WOM by tourists; consumer brand advocacy; and employee brand advocacy.

Though there has been minimal research on international student ambassadorship behaviours, the concept appears to have been well understood and applied amongst place marketers and higher education institutions. For example, the cities of Melbourne and Sydney, Australia, launched international student city ambassadorship programs (City of Melbourne, 2014; City of Sydney, 2015); higher education institutions themselves use exchange students as ambassadors for exchange destinations and institutions (e.g. CUHK, 2015); The Hong Kong Tourism Commission and the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups have equipped the city's full-time students aged 15 or above with a volunteer youth ambassador scheme to promote Hong Kong to visitors (The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 2015; Tourism Commission, 2015). Based on these observations, another contribution of this research is to fill the gap in the brand ambassadorship literature by involving a new population, namely exchange students.

6.2   Managerial contributions

The present study recognizes the interest of the Hong Kong marketing authorities to prioritize marketing to overseas tourist markets and of the Hong Kong government's University Grants Committee to diversify the international student population. In this context, student exchanges offer an opportunity to develop powerful destination ambassadorships offering wide international reach. The research results that have arisen from the combination of visual and verbal data are also relevant for the promotion of exchange experiences. First, the evidence that has been presented in this study suggests that promotional efforts for exchange experiences should not be the exclusive responsibility of tertiary institutions in the particular destination territory. Because exchange student discourses do not necessarily align with institutional intentions to foreground the educational aspects of the exchange, destination marketing organizations could potentially activate the touristic representations of destinations that appeal to exchange students.

The study has identified the relationship between acculturation status, an established relationship with Hong Kong and destination ambassadorships. As was discussed in the results section, exchange students fulfill several roles through the course of their exchange. Destination marketers can identify who is best placed to be an effective ambassador for the destination and when to leverage such communications.

This study has provided evidence for the ubiquitous online and offline communication by exchange students about Hong Kong and about the millennial generation which is advancing the experience economy. According to industry research, this generation uses online interactions for inspiration and as a pathway into real life engagements, with social media playing a key role. Millennials enjoy seeing the unique experiences of others on social media because it fulfils their desire to feel connected and to discover realities to which they would not normally be exposed (Eventbrite, 2017). The research also sheds light on the

formation process of a storytelling marketing approach to which Millennials are particularly responsive (Veiga et al., 2017).

The longitudinal research approach can assist both destinations and institutions to pinpoint moments in time when communications are more frequent about negative aspects of the destination and difficulties of the experience. It also identifies these problems and for their potential resolution by the destinations and the institutions. This can be done by recognizing the role to the fore.

The example of prejudicial treatment provides an illustration. The study confirmed the previous literature on acculturation which argued that interactions with locals have an important effect on the outcomes of acculturation. In particular, interactions with the general public; local resident perceptions of the students' origin country and of student nationalities play an important role (Nyaupane et al., 2008). This study reveals two important facts: the ambassadorship of Hong Kong is more likely to be affected by such negative aspects of acculturation later in the experience, and the role with which the ES identifies at the moment of recounting relative episodes will determine the tone of communications.

The study also evidenced that exchange students are naturally inclined to make the best of their experience. The institutional commitment to the exchange together with the blend of leisure and academic motivations that bring them to Hong Kong make them feel compelled to show appreciation for the opportunity. Therefore, the narrative provides a means of constructing the identity of a student that deserved the chance to exchange. When the exchange student role is at the forefront, participants recount their experiences by prioritizing positive anecdotes, but most importantly advance positive connotations of any experience. Participants bring out the good in Hong Kong, and the narrative thereby becomes a tool of ego enhancement in a social context where they feel expected to come across as positive, culturally capable, social and resourceful. Difficulties, challenges and discomforts are

recounted in a growth and personal change mind-set. This has positive consequences on the message that is conveyed about the place, and its communication.

For Hong Kong this "softens the edges" of the city to the wider public. In fact, issues that are spoken of more directly later during the exchange, are presented as being interesting, or challenging things to get used to during this phase. Aspects of crowding are referred to as hustle and bustle; air quality issues are tolerated as "not that bad yet"; the locals' attitude, which could be at first perceived as hasty and rude is rationalized and digested as a cultural difference. At this stage ambassadors rephrase the negative aspects of Hong Kong in an interesting and approachable manner.

Besides noting the capacity of exchange students to reinterpret negative aspects of the destination experience, destination marketers can also count on their willingness to try diverse activities. Exchange students represent a great experimental population with new forms of entertainment and emergent attractions because of less perceived time pressure combined with greater pressure to come across as uninhibited and adventurous. In addition, different roles and stages through the exchange can serve the purpose of promoting different attractions, sites and tourism products.

The maps that trace the geographical explorations of the destination illustrate the diverse sites across HK that this population has explored. It also provides a visualisation of the various activities that are undertaken. All of the study participants enjoyed the natural aspects of Hong Kong and went for hikes and to the beach. Such are sites less often visited by the average visitor to Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's "Best of all" campaign, which was first advanced in 2017 aims to encourage tourists to explore a wider territory. Hiking trails have been promoted with this in mind. The landscape pictures taken by exchange students are of high aesthetic standards and

incorporate the visual components that appeal to Millennials. Taking advantage of such visual narratives could allow the Hong Kong authorities to divert incoming tourists to the green areas at an earlier stage of their visit.

Exchange students have been shown to have interesting encounters with Hong Kong's unique cityscape. As was discussed in the results chapter as "Details of urban space" exchange students scratched the surface of the city iconic views, and advanced hidden views of the city as the experience progressed, Respondents emphasised the contrasts between openness and residensity; the steepness of Hong Kong's geography; and the layers of Hong Kong's intricate structure. These images are particularly appealing to urban tourists, urban photographers and rooftoppers. These are also tourist types who are more likely to explore "off the beaten track" Hong Kong.

As was explained in the discussion chapter and summarized in Table 10, there are several potential audiences, tourist activities and attractions that can be addressed through visual and verbal communications.

Another example can be taken from the final phase of the exchange period. As exchange students romanticized their experience retrospectively, the researcher witnessed the predominance of objects and people as main elements of photographs and a common compositional language made of black and white, strong filtering and strong framing. Such images serve several functions. Firstly, they have experiential value by isolating representations of memories and are therefore likely to instigate the curiosity of Millennials who seek non-mainstream experiences. Secondly, thanks to their visual register, they elicit strong emotional impact that prompts identification on the part of Millennials looking to consume experiences and create memories.

Compositions also provide marketers with potential ideas about what objects and places of the tourist experience represent photographic opportunities to record desired memories and to generate social media rumour (Prideaux & Coghlan, 2010; Prideaux, Lee, & Tsang, 2016). The emotional appeal of images is key to marketing to Millennials and to competing successfully in the experience economy (Jansson, 2018; Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2015). Tourists value *how* places are photographed. In the era of social media, tourist photographs are not only means of documentation, but also "distinctive markers of taste" (Jansson, 2018). They also attach value to spreadability: based on the ability to share images instantly and to elicit feedback from others, pictures are composed to attract positive attention (Jansson, 2018). Tourist-generated photographs are destination marketing tools on social media, since individuals can relate the place brand to their (online) identity (Wallace et al., 2012).

In addition to appealing to potential visitors, tourist-generated photographs can be used for return visitation. Photographs of the objects shared towards the end of the experience convey nostalgia and package romanticized memories. They could be used to recall visitors in the future. The idea of using the same user-generated photographs for this aim has already been tested. The Philippines set a whimsical example through the #photofail campaign that asked visitors to share their failed photographs to win a trip back to the Philippines.

The choice of tourist-generated online photographs follows the new commercial logic that fosters people to invest their time and creativity online (Jansson, 2018). Consumers are increasingly self-published, sharing their consumption stories on blogs and social media through diaries, videos, images and exchanging opinions (Brondoni, 2016). Therefore, a focus on visual narratives by exchange students can inform destination marketers towards the creation of digital and visual story-telling that appeals to youngsters such as the Millennials (Bernardi, 2018; Veiga et al., 2017).

The Hong Kong government has a potential opportunity to capitalise on tourist-generated visual storytelling to promote the destination, consistent with the view that "social-first" visual content constitutes the new language of engagement on digital media (Beautiful Destinations, 2017). In fact, exchange students emerged from this study as worthy social media influencers. Hong Kong could rely on these storytellers to tell unique stories that resonate with diverse online followings. Through familiarization with their dominant visual preferences it could inform its strategy to create "Instagrammable" moments within tourism experiences. In addition, exchange students are voluntary social media influencers that can be leveraged by destinations without investing in often-expensive KOLs or VIP ambassadors.

Another interesting finding relates to narratives that result as comparisons to other destinations visited during their stay in Hong Kong. Given that Hong Kong is an international hub and that often travellers to Asia will pass through Hong Kong while travelling to multiple Asian destinations, destination marketers should be aware of the destinations that their tourists visit before and after. This can readily achieved through social media public posts analysis and geographical check in of the users. Destination marketers with an awareness of how Hong Kong compares with other destinations can use each ambassador accordingly. One example is the Discover Hong Kong social media pages and their habit of reposting other users public posts and photographs of Hong Kong. They could select better moments to make use of these activities by simply following the experience of the user through Asia. They could also engage in targeted promotions or even collaboration opportunities (with other Asian destinations?) to these users based on such principles. Experience tourism communities are interest-based and self-published. Advancing content about their destination experiences leads to the development of a trend. They have the potential to analyse and share their first-hand destination and operator experiences to specific interest groups (Brondoni, 2016).

There are potential implications for the effective management of such communications by Hong Kong and other destinations. Besides the capacity to reach a wide young audience (which the HKTB has targeted in its latest Tourism Overview, 2017), destinations can also learn how to manage sources of dissatisfaction and negative communication about the destination. This is particularly important since there is ample evidence of the greater persuasiveness of negative than positive communication (Nyilasy, 2006).

This study has confirmed the potential of exchange students as destination ambassadors. There are multiple implications for researchers and destination policymakers. In line with Michaelidou et al. (2013) findings the present study has shown the merit of comparing the destination image that is advanced by marketers and the holistic image that is constructed by visitors. The findings yield important implications for the effective positioning and promotion of Hong Kong. Hong Kong marketers can leverage exchange students to promote the desired type of attractions. In fact, exchange students emerge as generators of quality online visual representations of Hong Kong. In addition, by the prolonged engagement of exchange students in the production of visuals, the destination has reliable sources of visual and verbal content about a variety of Hong Kong attractions. This is consistent with the HKTB strategy of diversifying the portfolio of tourist activities offered within Hong Kong and to disperse tourists across the territory.

The previously discussed hybridity of tourists and their ambassadorships implies that destinations could potentially leverage narratives of the same individual for promoting different ways of navigating Hong Kong. This can be done by pinpointing the roles that travelers assume based on how they define their experience at different times. One possible way is through social media. DMOs can easily track tourists' online communications about the experience, for example by using *geotagging* and *hashtagging* to follow discourses ascribed to the same type of travel and of traveller. If DMOs could understand when a role

comes to the fore, what triggers it and what follows in terms of destination ambassadorship, they could make more efficient use of free online destination ambassadorships. Finally, the study has evidenced the potential of experiences such as the student exchange in terms of producing enticing place narratives. This is particularly important in light of recent findings that Millennials are averse to the word "tourist" (Leask et al., 2013) and seek experiences close to those of residents because they create unique narratives for sharing with their peers (Veiga et al., 2017). An additional benefit of encouraging student exchanges is the prevention of the negative consequences that may result from the search for authentic experiences. Particularly in cities, tourists often look to experience the local life or to live like the residents. This drives them into areas of the city that are traditionally residential and encourages the conversion of real estate from residential use to tourist accommodation. Residents are then confronted with higher prices and are driven away from the affected areas. Removing residents from these areas means that they will be likely to lose their authenticity in the longer term (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016). In the case of student exchange, visitors use accommodation that is dedicated to the higher education sector and do not generate a need for more space for visitors (the exchange principle is that the Hong Kong institution sends out as many exchange students as it receives). This prevents the risk that areas will become gentrified.

6.2.1   Exchange experiences and destination promotion: a two-way relationship

In line with the aforementioned concept of hybridity of ambassadorship, the researcher deems that ambivalence is an important outcome of exchange student ambassadorships. By virtue of being the narrative of an emotional place for the exchange students, their ambassadorship intertwines the promotion of the destination to the student exchange. In their ambassadorships, exchange students referred interchangeably.to Hong Kong as a geographical place and as the student exchange experience. Questions about Hong Kong as a

destination were often mistaken as questions about the exchange experience, which symbolizes the instinctive associations that the exchange students make about Hong Kong. In this sense the researcher responded, at least partially, to Michelson and Álvarez Valencia (2016) call to undertake a critical examination of the meanings attached to the study abroad experience and how they are circulated. Michelson and Álvarez Valencia (2016) found that study abroad programs were foregrounding the touristic experience and downplaying the educational. Such discourses created expectations about the study abroad experience that were potentially distracting from learning outcomes such as intercultural and linguistic competences. The discourses presented here by exchange students represented the exchange more holistically, which might inspire relevant student exchange promotional materials.

Exchange students evidently construct place meanings place as ambassadors for Hong Kong, through the perspective that come with the circumstances of the exchange. In fact, besides the touristic aspects of the destination, the exchange student narratives testified to the human acculturative meanings of the experience and highlighted the learning and educational outcomes.

It is the responsibility of education managers to use longitudinal approaches to pinpoint the reference group that is addressed by exchange students, and therefore the best moments to leverage exchange student destination ambassadorships. The prior academic literature evidenced that international students are enticed by educational, touristic and residential aspects of the destination of study (Juvan & Lesjak, 2011; Lesjak et al., 2015; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Rodriguez Gonzalez et al., 2011; Rodríguez et al., 2012). This suggests that all of the roles that are upheld by the study participants can address the international student audience. Therefore, ES ambassadorships could help to promote international academic tourism or global educational travel (Grabowski et al., 2017; Rodríguez et al., 2012).

The student exchange represents a very valuable opportunity for destinations to leverage alternative portrayals of Hong Kong. Destination marketers have experimented with social media influencers to promote their destinations. The researcher argues in the current study that exchange students represent an even more interesting ctype of destination ambassadors. Social media influencers are semi-professionals in what they do. Not only their online communication is intentional but often is driven by business motivations. Their communication is normally centered on a theme, normally a particular type of lifestyle (family, healthy eating, yoga).

Another interesting thing to notice about social media influencers is that the types of images they advance are all very similar, highly dramatic, filtered, saturated. Hong Kong (and other destinations) makes use of these personalities for promotion purposes either by commissioning posts to them, or by reposting their user-generated content. A quick look at the Hong Kong Tourism Board Instagram to understand that the content re-posted is normally semi-professional. Hong Kong has also partnered with the world's biggest travel influencer, Beautiful Destinations, which has generated 15 images and videos shared on their official account (LegCo, 2017). This study has evidenced that even non-professional social media influencers like exchange students generate images that have common aesthetic aspects. It has been discussed how these have the potential to recall certain affective responses. It was also discussed that these images are likely to appeal to audiences that can relate to the roles upheld by the exchange students. Because of the unfolding of the roles throughout the experience, each individual exchange student can address several potential audiences. An exchange student's narrative about Hong Kong is likely to appeal to Millennials seeking for authentic and unique experiences, and short term new to Hong Kong seeking to explore Asia's world city alike.

Another aspect that represents an advantage of exchange students' destination ambassadorship over the traditional social media influencers is the depth of the experience. Social media influencers in general and travel influencers in particular, tend to travel around many destinations rather than having a long stay in one place and establishing a close relationship with it. The advantage of exchange students is that they stay longer and have the time and willingness to see more things. In addition, they have the time to get familiar with and accustomed to the main attractions and sites, hence opening up to less mainstream and more authentic experiences. This was evidenced throughout the study by the exploration of the students towards the middle and the end of the experience, when they started exploring sites that are less known, like the outlying islands and hikes; and when they started returning aspects of the destination that distance themselves from the image advanced through the tourist gaze. For example, exchange student-produced images started concentrating on certain details of the urban space, on familiar meals and objects, and on people.

Hence, exchange students provie, for several aspects, better opportunities for marketers to advance the destinations by providing voluntary, more varied and deeper ambassadorship.

6.3   Limitations and opportunities for future research

One of the main limitations of the current study is the impossibility of capturing the phenomenon in real time. Of course the researcher is unable to be present and to collect data about Hong Kong as spontaneous verbal communication occurs. It is common that researchers cannot access the real unmediated experience, instead relying on knowledge about real events and experiences through individuals' storytelling and narratives. Social media analysis tools have the potential to capture real-time online verbal and visual narrative since these are remotely accessible. There is potential to us social media analysis tools and visual analysis software to conduct a more objective analysis of online photographs compositions on a much bigger set of social media data, and from a larger sample. An

example of previous research that has sorted social media photographs of cities based on compositional aspects is given by Hochman and Manovich (2013); Hochman and Schwartz (2012). Their analysis is capable of identifying dominant visual preferences employed by social media users that portray the same event or the same part of a city. While the ability to analyse a large volume of photographs simultaneously is important to corroborate compositional commonalities across users, this system is unsuited to addressing the emotional appeal of the photographs.

The methods that have been deployed in this study potentially pave a way for future researchers. Qualitative analysis of the expressive content, and therefore affective impact, of images could be conducted following computerized compositional analysis. While software and algorithms can aggregate large quantities of data from social media, the emotional impact, the feel of the image, its corporeal meanings and the sociocultural meanings cannot be readily understood through such means. For these reasons, the researcher deemed it as more appropriate to focus on the depth of analysis, and selected a small sample. By understanding the corporeal experience of the visual she has shown its potential for destination marketing. This lies particularly in the capacity of visuals to establish an emotional connection with the audience. By connecting both verbal and visual narratives to their situated-ness in terms of acculturation and relationship with Hong Kong, she emphasised the potential of ambitioned identities towards ambassadorship.

This research has emphasised the advantages of longitudinal approaches to data collection. Yet, the longitudinal approach may also be the origin of one of the research's most significant limitations. It may, in fact, be that the research's data authenticy is in question. Authentic data are here understood as trustworthy, rigurous and valid qualitative data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Wang (2013) conducted a valuable self-reflection of his research in an international school where he became better aware of how the

relationship he established with the researched students and teachers may have made him more sympathetic to them. Similarly to what happened to him, the researcher in this study has established more intimate friendships with her research participants. That may have meant for the researcher that he was indentifying with the students and therefore his "perspectives were inevitably being colored" (Wang, 2013, p. 775).

This research has provided the reader with creditable consclusions by acknowledging and thoroughly explaining the process of constructing them. In fact, the constructivist approach recognises reality as a socially constructed truth. It is in appropriately and throroughly explaining the construction process that lies the authenticity of the conclusions (Wang, 2013). The researcher also attempted to ensure the authenticity of the data shared by means of triangulation. Two types of triangulations were used in this study: data source triangulation and method triangulation. The first refers to relating and comparing different sets of data collected with the aim to investigate the same phenomenon, in this case the message advanced about Hong Kong. The researcher ustilised both verbal and visual narratives to analyse the ambassadorship for Hong Kong. Method triangulation was implemented by analysing data firstly based on the date they were collected on and chronologically; only later the same data were analysed based on the respondent who shared them. This way the researcher could compare data coming from different phases of the fieldwork and from different people (Wang, 2013).

Another limitation of the study could be the fact that the researcher may have elicited certain topics and conversations of a certain quality that other listerners would have not. A similar case occurred in Randall, Prior, and Skarborn (2006) where the fact that one of the interviewers was a foreigner ensued in respondents reminiscing travels more often that they did with other local interviewers. The researcher was known to the students as an international student and as a well travelled individual. In addition, having established very

amicable relationships with them over time, they may have felt that providing valuable content for the researcher's PhD thesis was expected of them. This came up explicitly through interviews with the Chinese and Korean respondents in particular, where after long conversations they would state things like "I hope all this is useful for you" or "sorry if I don't have something interesting to say". The researcher would in these cases emphasise that the quality of data is exactly in the spontaneity of the conversations and that "anything goes".

Randall et al. (2006) argue that "no listener ever hears the whole story and no teller ever tells it", because narratives are in big part a function of who is listening and the relationship that the narrator has with the listener.

Another limitation of the current study is that the findings cannot be generalized to other traveller groups. Therefore, the scheme devised by the researcher representing the evolution of a destination ambassador cannot be directly applied to most tourism forms. Yet, the study is a pioneer on destination ambassadorships in that it is longitudinal and takes account of fluid identities. Future researchers could profile potential audiences for the visual and verbal narratives of exchange students based on the emotional connections and narratives that appeal to certain identities and needs. The population of the present study also reflects many Millennial characteristics. Hence, findings from the interviews conducted on exchange students in Hong Kong could provide insights into the Millennial traveller mentality.

The study findings have suggested that identities change over time and result in changing destination ambassadorships. Future research could emulate the longitudinal approach to focus on another destination and type of traveler and map such changes onto a timeline with a view to identifying the phases during which user-generated content is most useful to marketers.

Future research could use similar methods to conduct an in-depth investigation of the next population to enter its prime spending years, namely generation Z. The latter is the first generation of true "digital natives". Gen Zs were born when technology was "bringing the world together". They have relatively more travel experience than previous generations, are more likely to migrate across borders, and to establish international friendships than any previous generation. Arguably, Generation Z is the first that is truly global. Research shows that they are beyond divisions across countries, cultures and faiths, the first example of global citizenship (The Varkey Foundation, 2017).

While the researcher is aware of the limitations in terms of generalizability of the study findings, there are principles which she believes may benefit both research and the industry, if applied to other study populations. In particular, the researcher suggests that future research takes account of traveler hybridity and incorporates the multiplicity and unfolding of traveler purposes and identities during a single trip. Here it has been discussed that the student exchange readily lends itself to demonstrating this aspect because of the multiple purposes involved and the longer-term perspective. Yet, there are surely other types of travel that could benefit from this approach, notably working-holidays, volunteer tourism and gap years.

It would be interesting to undertake a comparison of the images that are shared by shorter-term and longer-term tourists. In the short term it seems as if tourists seek confirmation of their pre-formed destination images. In the case of Hong Kong it is the busy-ness, the city lights, the skyscrapers, the skyline and other hallmarks. However through the passage of time, respondents are more attracted by the less well-known and less commercial aspects of the destination, such as hikes through nature, villages, islands and parks. This green Hong Kong is also the part of the city that the HKTB intends to start promoting. Exchange students and their user-generated content can provide a cheap, yet quality and insightful, marketing method for a different type of tourism in Hong Kong.

Though the current study has limitations about of generalizability because of the chosen population, it has successfully given in-depth consideration to a complex phenomenon that would have been difficult to follow using a bigger sample or focused on mainstream visitors to Hong Kong tourists because of their constrained length of stay. The exchange student population has suited the study of destination ambassadorship because the respondents qualify as tourists, it uphold the characteristics of young tourists to Hong Kong such as social media connectedness, point to point travel, financial limitations and motivations to travel; and because they engage in a deep destination experience and prolonged ambassadorship practice, hence reflecting and allowing the observation of contingent and fluid identities and narratives.

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8   Appendices

8.1   Literature review summary 1

In this first part of the literature review the researcher has contextualized the ESs population with reference to the several wider groups it belongs to. Relevant commonalities across the groups have been pointed out. In particular, it is noted that:

3. ESs are a subgroup of international students: they temporarily relocate abroad for study within the framework of their on-going degree at the home institutions;

4. ESs are educational travelers. The latter are defined as travelers for whom education and learning are the primary or secondary elements of the trip. The student exchange is also referred to as *international academic tourism*.

5. Exchange students

   5.1. have greater willingness to visit and familiarize with the host country because of the transience of the experience;

   5.2. have abundant free time (compared to residents)

   5.3. undertake a significantly long stay (compared to other visitors to the destination)

6. Exchange Students are ascribable to the acculturating group of the sojourners, who are destination's temporary residents, in fact they:

   6.1. take up temporary residence in the destination

   6.2. for a set purpose

   6.3. are faced with acculturation challenges that are commonplace with immigrants

7. Exchange students' main motivations are

   7.1. personal and professional development

   7.2. escapism and travel-related motivations

   7.3. therefore choosing the study destination depends partially on its tourist-related attributes (pull factors);

8. A student exchange is a combination of residential life and travel within a timeframe consistent with tourism parameters (less than a year). Besides the duration of stay, the combination is also manifest through motivations, consumption patterns and behaviours in the destination.

9. In terms of ambassadorship, the characteristics of ES are:

   9.1. to make use of personal recommendations to choose their destinations

   9.2. to play a role in residents' and citizens' destination brand ambassadorship in virtue of being temporary residents in the applicable destination;

   9.3. to represent a potential source of destination WOM through their first-person storytelling

8.2   Literature review summary 2

In this second part of the literature review the researcher has attempted to introduce the concept of acculturation and to explain how it occurs in the context of the student exchange. In particular, the information to take away from this discussion is:

1. Exchange students constitute an acculturating group. They can be situated within the sojourners, tourists or international students acculturating groups. They all share a transitory and prolonged exposure to diversity and displacement from the origin culture.

2. The main characteristics of ES acculturation are:

   2.1. The perspective of return home, hence the (im)permanence of the stay;

   2.2. The emotional investment, which affects the nature of the relationship with the destination;

   2.3. The voluntariness of relocation

3. Generally speaking, acculturation has three premises:

   3.1. Contact between individuals from different cultures;

337

3.2. Reciprocal influence between the cultures in contact;

3.3. Change as a process and an outcome – referring to a new-found functioning in a changed environment.

4. Cultural learning theories of acculturation concentrate on behavioral choices such as the trade-off between maintaining one's own culture and acquiring the host culture;

5. Stress and coping theories of acculturation refer to the affective and emotional aspects, such as acculturative stresses and ways of coping with them;

6. Social identification theories of acculturation refer to the cognitive aspects such as acculturating individuals' identification with one's own social group and perception of other social groups.

7. Acculturation may interact with the process of ambassadorship formation because of its influence on the acculturating individual's:

7.1. Satisfaction with the sojourn;

7.2. Socialization with host nationals;

7.3. Consumer behaviour (consumer acculturation).

8. ESs could be good destination ambassadors because of their relatively high educational level. This is usually related to better acculturation outcomes;

9. The ES' acculturation process is likely affected by:

9.1. attitudes, impressions and expectations prior the stay and their (dis)confirmation;

9.2. purpose for moving to the host destination;

9.3. personal characteristics;

9.4. type of emotional investment in the host society;

9.5. Sources of acculturative stress.

10. Other streams of acculturation literature that are insightful for the current research are

10.1. Consumer acculturation, which refers to changes and adaptations to the host culture as they manifest themselves in the marketplace;

10.2. Re-acculturation: the process of re-adjusting to the home culture upon return from a period abroad.

8.2.1 Literature review summary 3a

1. Destination branding combines several products and services and involves a great number of internal and external stakeholders;

   1.1. Residents are internal stakeholders of a destination, to whom organizational citizenship and internal brand building models are applicable;

   1.2. Tourists are the destination's customers, to whom principles of customer brand ambassadorship are applicable;

   1.3. ESs are both.

2. The place name is a brand in itself, as it elicits perceptions about the place reputation and its image. Therefore, for the purpose of this study the place name Hong Kong is the subject of the ambassadorship.

3. Like for visitors, ESs first person narratives about their destination experience are comparable to consumers' reports on brand use.

4. ES ambassadorship revolves around the relationship established with Hong Kong. The place name Hong Kong connotes both the place and the brand with which the ES establishes a relationship which is defined by

   4.1. Self-connection with the place;

   4.2. Interdependence;

   4.3. Congruity.

8.2.2   Literature review summary 3b

In this section on customer based brand ambassadorship the researcher has explained the application of concepts of consumer brand equity to brand ambassadorship and to the context of tourist destinations. In particular, the main points are:

1. Destination brand equity is the collection of intangible assets in the single perception of the destination. It is reinforced by

    1.1. destination awareness;

    1.2. destination image;

    1.3. destination loyalty;

2. All three afore-mentioned elements are inputs and outcomes of communication about the destination (in the form of WOM/first-person narratives);

3. If a brand expresses significant aspects of the self, there is a self-brand connection;

4. Like brands, places can also be important to the self-concept, which encourages positive WOM;

5. Identification with a reference group it's the feeling of oneness towards a human aggregate that is the reflection of an aspirational lifestyle or persona

6. Sense of place is the meaning and value attached to a place and is based on the genius loci, the shared sense of the spirit of the place:

    6.1. sense of place involves the destination being part of the self-concept

    6.2. length of residence positively affects the development of sense of place

    6.3. sense of place positively influences destination's ambassadorship

7. Satisfaction with the destination experience affects the likelihood of destination brand ambassadorship.

8. Brand ambassadorship is defined as "the active advancing into the external environment of communication about the destination experience and the associated

lifestyle. It is an unsolicited and proactive behaviour that takes the form of verbal or visual narrative, both in person or online"

9. The current study focuses on ES as senders of ambassadorship about the destination;

8.2.3   Literature review summary 3c

In this section about employee-based brand ambassadorship the researcher has attempted to contextualize exchange students brand ambassadorship in their role as the destination's internal stakeholders by discussing previous literature on organization management. The most relevant information to take away is:

1. Organization management internal branding principles can be applied to understand what encourages exchange students' brand ambassadorship;

2. Brand ambassadorship attitudes can be improved to achieve brand commitment through:

   2.1. Psychological ownership

   2.2. Sense of belonging

   2.3. both reinforced by

      2.3.1. Possessive experiences of the brand;

      2.3.2. Brand-role salience;

      2.3.3. Self-identification with the brand, which in turn occurs thanks to:

         2.3.3.1. Congruence between the personality and values of the individual and of the brand;

      2.3.4. Satisfaction of individuals' psychological needs by the brand;

      2.3.5. [in the case of ESs] identification occurs through the destination pull factors that fulfill their self-expression and self-actualization aspirations, such as lifestyle, and it is represented by place attachment.

2.4. Sense of belonging to the brand community, which depends on:

2.4.1. Positive perceptions of the brand environment;

3. It is possible to act upon individuals' brand ambassadorship behaviours that consist in

3.1. Brand endorsement and defense of the brand;

3.2. Advancement and display of enthusiasm;

3.3. Brand allegiance;

3.4. Sportsmanship;

3.5. In-role brand consistent behaviours.

4. Overall, individuals' intrinsic motivations and inherent characteristics might enhance or limit the effectiveness of stimuli to encourage brand ambassadorship.

8.2.4   Literature Review Summary 3d

This section on destination brand ambassadorship discussed the means and media for destination communication, with particular attention to the forms of narrative, as stories and as photographs. The most important conclusions to draw from the presented literature are:

1. The most suited ambassadors to promote the place image are individuals that have a connection with the destination. Ambassadors usually

1.1. have experiential attachment to a destination;

1.2. have positive attitudes towards the place brand;

1.3. identify with the place brand;

2. Even if they do not actively advance the destination brand to others, ambassadors are anchors of the destination brand and therefore become receivers of interactions about the destination initiated by third parties;

3. Ambassadors are motivated to promote the destination mostly by the sense of belonging to "something bigger", such as being part of a campaign, which promotes a greater sense of affection and connection;

4. Ambassadors mostly promote the place through narratives, which represent effective marketing tools for destinations because

    4.1. they are spontaneous and relatively unbiased reports of somebody's else experience;

    4.2. their structure allows the audience to identify with the narrator;

5. Narratives are a reflection of the narrators' identities, and are therefore fluid across contexts of retelling in the stream of the experience. Hence, the present research focuses on how narratives change throughout the experience.

    5.1. Through narratives, tourist story-tellers recall vivid images of lived identities in the listeners' minds;

6. Like identities, the stories told are selective and perspectival. They reflect moments that people choose to remember, forget, neglect and amplify based on the audience and the context in which they are told;

7. Besides verbal accounts, narratives can also be in visual form. In this research the focus is on online visuals because

    7.1. they are an effective destination promotional tool that can be distributed quickly and at a distance;

    7.2. tourist online photography occurs on multiple media and therefore addresses multiple audiences;

    7.3. photography is the embodied expression of how the tourist produces, consumes and communicates places;

7.4. online tourist-generated photographs are inexpensive tools that allow monitoring tourists' perceived destination brand image and brand associations.

8. Because identities are fluid throughout the experience, so is the visual narrative. Therefore

8.1. online photography is the embodied expression of identities tourists upheld throughout their experience and of spaces where to enact the aspired self-image

8.2. identities involve fluid and dynamic interrelationships of performances, practices and processes that cannot be easily compartmentalized;

8.3. they are often a reflection of tourists' desired self-image rather than the destination and the travel experience (in particular on social media);

8.4. they represent how tourists respond to and accommodate experiences as they unfold.

8.2.5   Incentives

Exchange students not only underwent an important number of interviews, but were also asked to authorize the researcher to view their social media activity. Together with the risky nature of drop-out which is typical of the longitudinal study, these two issues increased the likelihood of respondents' attrition. To prevent so, the researcher appropriately incentivized respondents to a continuous participation. The main issue here was to make sure that respondents would be on board until the very end, including the *"after"* phase. Building rapport over time with the respondent has been fundamental for the success of the qualitative longitudinal data collection (Patrick, 2012). The researcher ensured that participants felt recognized for their contribution and belonging to the research group.

The researcher provided small incentives each data collection episode and a big significant one at the end of the whole procedure. She provided vouchers for coffees,

spending cards or vouchers for supermarkets in a reasonable value for the time dedicated. They could express their preferences at the very beginning, at the first meeting, when given options of which vouchers/cards to choose from. By letting they choose among an array of options the researcher did not influence their choice of activities to undertake in the free time and reduced the feeling of being limited in the material benefits they can obtain from participation in the study.

Students were then rewarded the big incentive at the end only if they participated to each data collection episode. Given that each student comes from a different country and might want to spend on different things, an Amazon or other online shopping platforms bonuses seemed the most appropriate way to provide each one of them with a valuable reward easily spendable.

8.3 Verbal Narrative Descriptive Analysis procedure

8.3.1 During data collection

Since the beginning of the data collection process, the researcher prioritized the use of an important tool to iterative qualitative research: notes (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher took notes for each interview episode of each interviewee. These notes were compiled immediately after the interview and they were mostly aimed at triangulating the interviews with observation. For example, if a student looked particularly tired or nervous on that day, the researcher would take note of that to ensure the validity of data. Notes also related to students agreeableness and friendliness towards the interviewer; questions that were difficult to answer; diversions, and so on. She would also take note of the conversation preceding and following the actual interview. Finally, for all the non-English native speakers, she kept track of changes in their English level [put notes in appendix].

8.3.2   During Transcription

As the researcher moved on to the transcription of data, she undertook the very first step towards the development of interpretations: memoing. The term refers to the practice of writing down memos, or bracketed notes, of the thoughts that occur to the researcher while transcribing, such as a literature sources related to the transcript, or potential connections between what different interviewees said (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Warren & Karner, 2010). Through the memos noted down while typing the transcripts and re-reading them, not only the researcher became more aware of how she was thinking about the data, but also she started tying together different excerpts of data, and hence developing tentative ideas for topics and relationships [put memos in appendix].

Transcriptions also represented the opportunity for the researcher to mark participants' notable quotations. These served two purposes. First, the researcher could compile quotations to compile in the students' experience album. Secondly quotations suggested concepts or topics worth investigating in the future. Notable quotations are parts of interviews that "[are] well phrased, sum up hours of conversations, or provide a moral" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 191) [display notable quotations in appendix].

8.3.3   Descriptive data analysis – Organizing the data in preparation for interpretive analysis

8.3.3.1   Data management

The very first step into the analytic process was aimed at preparing the data for the interpretive analytic process. As suggested by Maxwell (2013) and Ritchie et al. (2014), the researcher organized the data into manageable segments.

First, she prepared a **summary** of each interview. The summary included information such as pseudonym of the interviewee, time and location of the interview, duration of the interview. In addition, in order to simplify with later comparisons, the main points expressed

in the interview were included in each summary (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). [display summaries in appendix].

The second step towards effective data management was **familiarization** with the data (Ritchie et al., 2014). At this point the researcher immersed herself in the transcripts to gain an overview of the topics that were recurrent, relevant to the research questions and grounded in the data. Therefore, she carried out the process until she felt that the diversity of circumstances and characteristics within the data set were understood, and she could **categorize and sort chunks of interviews based on their similarity** (Maxwell, 2013).

8.3.3.2   Analytic Description of the Data

From the rough categorization achieved with familiarization, the researcher proceeded to further and better organize the data. The aim was to compose a cohesive representation of the data based on identified recurring patterns or topics, named analytic description (Warren & Karner, 2010).

8.3.3.3   Open coding

Recurring patterns and topics are represented through a categorizing strategy named coding, which rearranges the data in categories that facilitate comparison and the development of broader theoretical concepts (Maxwell, 2013). **Coding** offers a way of retrieving what was said on each topic by marking a passage in the interview with a word or a phrase that represents what it's being talked about. The unit of analysis is the coded passage of interview considered important and useful to the research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The first time undertaking coding, the researcher immersed herself in the transcripts, remaining open to whatever was readable from the data and without precluding any potential topic. Even though theoretical ideas had influenced the design of the study and the broad topics to be explored, at this stage the generated codes were firmly grounded solely in the

data (Ritchie et al., 2014). This was an inductive attempt to develop new insights and categories, also called **"open coding"** (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Warren & Karner, 2010).

With open coding the researcher built upon the previous first browsing of the data through familiarization. In fact coding constitutes a second and more structured attempt at perusing the transcripts. While familiarization's purpose is to use recurrences and similarities among transcripts to group chunks of data, open coding's priority is to let topics emerge inductively. Therefore, during familiarization the researcher was sensitized to topics she had clear intentions to investigate. Open coding demands that she put herself in a different mindset and let topics emerge that she had not necessarily sought instantiations for. The two approaches together are a more comprehensive coverage of the data. Reading and re-reading the transcripts led the researcher to noticing similarities or common features, but also made her aware of how she had been sensitized to different issues and paid attention to different aspects at different points in time (Warren & Karner, 2010).

The researcher carried out open coding by organizing chunks of transcripts based on the type of information they represented, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2012):

- Events: occurrences, incidents, instances when a situation arises (for example: a meeting, an activity, an exam);

- Topical Markers: a way to refer to the issue being discussed in the portion of interview. It could be people, places or issues.

- Examples: portions of transcripts that answer to the question "what is this an example of?"

- Concepts: ideas that emerge from the ordinary speech of interviewees and expressed as a single noun or phrase. They usually reflect the jargon of the field of the interviewees and "convey goals, values, perceptions, or attitudes or represent

strategies that frame action" (p. 194). Sometimes concepts are wrapped into metaphors and are not actually named.

9.

8.3.3.4   Focused coding

Based on the identified events, topical markers, examples and concepts, and based on the topics identified during both familiarization and open coding, the researcher started coding transcripts into categories. To do so the researcher had to make choices as to what topics to do justice to and to focus on (Warren & Karner, 2010). She developed organizational categories to organize the data by separating chunks of transcripts that have more bearing for a certain topic from the others (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Hence, organizational categories are containers of respondent statements on a certain topic without yet going into the detail of what is said about it (Maxwell, 2013).

The choice of what topics to focus on and to code was made once again by following recommendations by Rubin and Rubin (2012) and Maxwell (2013). According to these authors, researchers should attribute both substantive categories and categories based on topics established a priori. Substantive categories represent the topics emerging from the inductive open coding carried out in the previous phase. These categories group topics emphasized by participants, descriptive of their own words (as in the case of notable quotes), therefore generated inductively. Developing substantive categories allows the emergence of ideas that do not fit into the pre-existing theoretical framework. The researcher also allowed for categories based on a priori topics, namely the ones she had explicitly asked about and those suggested by the reviewed literature. Maxwell (2013) named these categories emic and etic respectively.

These typologies also apply to sub-categories. Sub-categories are deeper into the content of each organizational category, and represent not only what is said about each, but

also what the respondents meant and did. Hence, while organizational categories are conceptual boxes for sorting the data, the subcategories make claims about the topics (Maxwell, 2013).

8.3.4   Data collection: conversation guide

Table 14 - Proposed Interview Guide (Hennink et al., 2011)

Introduction

1. Researcher introduces herself
 	
Italian
International Student – PhD
In HK for one year and a half
   Purpose of the research is explained
 	
Understand how exchange students live their experience and HK
Understand how exchange students talk about HK
   Aspects of confidentiality and anonymity are explained
 	
Findings will be presented anonymously
Transcripts available only to interviewer and supervisors
Images used for analysis and not published unless authorized
   Expected outcome of the research is explained
 	
Research is aimed at the completion of a PhD thesis and eventually academic publication
   Expected use of the data collected and the recording is explained
 	
There will be tape recording
There will be transcription
There will be analysis of the photos and interviews

Stage	Question	Purpose	Concept
Pre *opening*	Tell me a bit about yourself… Age Country of origin Origin of the family Composition of family Country of study Department of study	To contextualize the exchange student according to his/her background and self-reported characteristics	"Objective" personal characteristics, familiar culture(s) – acculturation, relationship, ambassadorship.
Pre	What is your previous experience abroad? For travel/ family/ study/ work Example: how about experiences abroad other than for study, such as vacation or visiting friends? Have you ever worked in another country? Places Who with How long	To understand ES previous experience in foreign countries and encounters with different cultures	Previous acculturation experience, perceived cultural distance from destination - Acculturation
Pre	How would you describe Hong Kong? As a place / city	To uncover the ES image of the destination	Expectations and organic image + self-representation – Acculturation, relationship and ambassadorship
Pre	How do you think life in HK will be? / How do you imagine your life in HK? Lifestyle Difficulties	To uncover the ES idea of the relationship that will be established with the destination – rituals and encounters.	
Pre	What made you decide to do your exchange in HK? /	To acknowledge the motivations to travel to the destination. [Maybe] to	Motivation [intrinsic or not], organic image, expectations – acculturation and relationship.

Stage	Question	Purpose	Concept
	Why did you choose HK for your exchange?	stimulate more discussion about expectations and image.	
Pre	What do you expect from this exchange in HK? / What outcome do you wish for at the end of the exchange? Career Personal	To understand the outcomes the ES expects from the experience - function	Satisfaction – ambassadorship
Pre	"Given your personality, is Hong Kong a suitable place for you?" / "Why do you think Hong Kong is the right place for you?" / "Is Hong Kong a good place for someone with your character and personality?". Provide Example	To understand how the ES identifies with the destination (Aspirational)	Extension of self-concept, perceived congruence with personality, representation of relevant aspects of the self, place attachment – Antecedents of Relationship and Ambassadorship
On Arrival	What is your impression of Hong Kong so far?	To uncover the first impression/image about HK	Image formation - Ambassadorship
On Arrival	What would you tell others about HK? Who	To understand initial communication	Approximation of Narrative - Ambassadorship

Stage	Question	Purpose	Concept
	When	about HK	
On arrival	What are the differences from your origin country that you found in HK?	To identify potential challenges or elements of extra-ordinariness that the ES notices at first.	
On arrival	What kind of person do you think you are? / How would you define yourself? Confidence Sociability Curiosity Coping	To capture the ES personal characteristics and their change	Self-representation – Acculturation, Relationship and Ambassadorship *Asked on arrival, to be kept separate by questions about how does HK represent personality*
During	Tell me about your experience in HK so far… Extra-ordinary Establishment of routines Challenges	To let the narrative emerge, to start the ES sense making process through sense giving	Narrative – approximation of ambassadorship
During	Why do you think HK is the right place for your personality? / How does HK fit your personality? / In what way do you identify with HK as a place?	To understand how the ES identifies with the destination (Real experience)	Extension of self-concept, perceived congruence with personality, representation of relevant aspects of the self, place attachment – Antecedents of Relationship and Ambassadorship

Stage	Question	Purpose	Concept
	Let the respondent pick pictures they shared that they think are the most representative of their experience in HK up to the moment of the interview. - What is the story behind this photo? - Who are you with or who took it? - Why do you think it is a good photo to share on social media? - What do you think your social network will think when they see it?		
During	What aspects of your daily life did you have to change once in HK? / What are the changes that you had to make to live in HK?	To understand how the ES negotiates between cultures (not necessarily only two) To explore how the exchange students selects and learns new daily life practices	Retention of one's own culture, assimilation of local culture(s) – Acculturation and Relationship Consumption choices and new habits – Acculturation
During	Do you feel that you are settling in? / How comfortable do you feel in HK? / Does it feel like home yet? Sense of belonging Sense of fit	To understand if and how the ES came to terms with life in HK.	Acquisition of local culture - Acculturation
During	When was the last time you faced a problem here in HK and how did you solve it?	To understand how the exchange student copes with challenges	The psychological state brought by problems and the typical response to problems (avoidance, social support,…) – Acculturation, Relationship and Ambassadorship
During	Who are the people you want to/like to	To understand the ES sense of	Being part of a tribe, membership – Acculturation and

Stage	Question	Purpose	Concept
	hang out with? / Is it a group in HK that you feel part of? Where are they from Where did you meet them Most of the time Free time What do together	belonging to a community	Ambassadorship
During	When you are not alone, who are the people/is the person you spend most of the time with? Where are they from Where did you meet them Most of the time Free time What do together	To understand the ES emotional investment	Degree and type of social interactions in the destination – Acculturation, Relationship and Ambassadorship
During	What are the places in HK that you go the most often to? Most frequented places Most liked With whom	To explore the interdependence established with the destination	Encounters with destination space, rituals, routines – Relationship
During	How would you talk about HK with others? Who How often What means Positive/negative What is NOT said	To explore the ES verbal communication about the destination	Audience, means and frequency
During	What do you tell others about HK people?	To explore the ES verbal communication	Audience, means and frequency

Stage	Question	Purpose	Concept
		about the destination	
After	What is unique about HK? Why Comparison home environment	To understand the ES sense of place	Awareness of what are significant cultural elements, how and why – Acculturation and Ambassadorship
After	If a friend asked you to tell him about your experience in HK, what would you say? Life Study	To explore what are the ES accounts about the destination	Narrative as approximation of WOM and process of sense making and sense giving, as report of brand use.

8.3.5   Data collection: academic calendar

Below is a summary of the applicable academic calendar corresponding to the year of the data collection.

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Academic Calendar 2015-16 (by Semester Week)

Month	Week	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Sem. Week	Notes
Aug 2015	--	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	--	Aug. 31: Sem. 1 commences (13 teaching weeks: 31 Aug - 28 Nov 2015)
Sep	1	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	Aug. 31 - Sep. 12: Add/Drop Period for Sem. 1
	2	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	2	
	3	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	3	
	4	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	4	Sep. 27: Mid-Autumn Festival (all evening classes suspended)
Oct	5	28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	Sep. 28: The day following Mid-Autumn Festival / Oct. 1: National Day
	6	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	6	
	7	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	7	
	8	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	8	Oct. 21: Chung Yeung Festival
Nov	9	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	9	
	10	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	10	
	11	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	11	
	12	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	12	
	13	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	13	Nov. 28: Sem. 1 teaching ends
Dec	14	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	Exam.	Nov. 30 - Dec. 3: Revision Days for Sem. 1 / Dec. 4 - 19: Examination Period for Sem. 1
	15	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Exam.	
	16	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Exam.	
	17	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	) Exam.	Dec. 25: Christmas Day / Dec. 26: The first weekday after Christmas Day
Jan 2016	18	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	) Result) Processing	Dec. 30: All subject assessment results finalised / Jan. 1: The First Day of January
	19	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		Jan. 8: Finalisation of overall assessment results / Jan. 9: Announcement of Sem. 1 overall assessment results
	20	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	1	Jan. 11: Sem. 2 commences (13 teaching weeks: 11 Jan - 16 Apr 2016)
	21	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	2	Jan. 11 - 23: Add/Drop Period for Sem. 2
	22	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	3	
Feb	23	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	4	Feb. 7: Lunar New Year's Eve (all evening classes suspended)
	24	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	Lunar New Year Break	Feb. 8 - 10: Lunar New Year Holidays / Feb. 11 - 13: Lunar New Year Break (all day-time and evening classes suspended)
	25	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	5	
	26	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	6	
Mar	27	29	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
	28	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	8	
	29	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	9	
	30	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	10	Mar. 25 - 28: Easter Holidays
Apr	31	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	11	
	32	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	Apr. 4: Ching Ming Festival
	33	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	13	Apr. 16: Sem. 2 teaching ends
	34	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	Exam.	Apr. 18 - 21: Revision Days for Sem. 2 / Apr. 22 - May 9: Examination Period for Sem. 2
May	35	25	26	27	28	29	30	1	Exam.	
	36	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Exam.	May 2: The day following Labour Day
	37	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	) Exam. / Exam.) Result) Processing	May 14: The Buddha's Birthday
	38	16	17	18	19	20	21	22		May 18: All subject assessment results finalised
	39	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	1	May 23: Summer Term commences (7 teaching weeks: 23 May - 9 Jul 2016) / May 23 - 28: Add/Drop Period for Summer Term
Jun	40	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	2	May 25: Finalisation of overall assessment results / May 26: Announcement of Sem. 2 overall assessment results
	41	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	3	Jun. 9: Tuen Ng Festival
	42	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	4	
	43	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	5	
Jul	44	27	28	29	30	1	2	3	6	Jul. 1: HKSAR Establishment Day
	45	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	7	Jul. 9: Summer Term teaching ends
	46	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	Exam.	Jul. 11 - 16: Examination Period for Summer Term
	47	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	) Exam.	
	48	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	) Result) Processing	Jul. 25: All subject assessment results finalised
Aug	49	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	--	Aug. 1: Finalisation of overall assessment results / Aug. 2: Announcement of Summer Term overall assessment results
	50	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	--	
	51	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	--	
	52	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	--	Aug. 28: Academic Year 2015-16 ends

General Holidays (tentative for 2016)

Dates of finalisation of examination results

October 2014

8.4   Interview excerpts

The following interview excerpt from Amber exemplifies the change in tone when recounting episodes of prejudicial treatment at later stages of the experience, as opposed to a positive tone in the beginning:

"[…] an older woman, I don't know, maybe early 80s or late 70s, she just kept staring at me and she spoke to the woman we are with in Cantonese like 'is she a retard?, she doesn't know how to eat?' cause I was like... noodles are really hard to eat with chopsticks […] and she was like literally watching me eat like I was some attraction, but she was like judging me, she was like Simon on I guess American Idol... just like scowling at me eating... just awkward […] and the lady I was with she said 'well, you have to figure she probably stayed here for her whole life. And to her is like *you are how old and you cannot eat properly?*'. I am like, '*do I look like I am from here though?*' " [Amber, interview 4].

Such aspect of acculturation and the way the acculturation process unfolded throughout the stay becomes part of the narrative of Hong Kong. Illustrative is the fact that such episodes were narrated in response to "What would you tell people about Hong Kong?". The question sought narratives that relate more closely to the place per se, but the respondents often answered by recounting human and cultural negotiations. This supports the finding that Hong Kong is narrated as an emotional place.

"I would just say don't pay attention to who stares… They are just curious in a way... I think that's a big one. […] and then I would say some people might take your picture, based on where you go." [Amber, interview 4].

8.5 Destination Navigation: Maps by respondent

Below the author can explore the maps of the spots in Hong Kong visited by individual students at each stage of the experience. By simply clicking on the respondent name, the reader will be redirected to the individual's respondent map.

Maps
Amber
Bart
Charlotte
Heather
Iris
Janine
Jasper
Nadia
Ronald
Georgia
Shellie
EVERYONE