

CUSTOMER-TO-CUSTOMER RELATIONS IN THE CRUISE INDUSTRY: HOW IS IT PERCEIVED FROM THE EMPLOYEES' POINT OF VIEW?

Abstract

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Purpose – The aim of this research is to examine the perception of social relationships among cruise passengers, extending beyond mere courtesy, as viewed from the perspective of employees.

Methodology/ Design / Approach – The study adopts a qualitative approach, consisting of 35 interviews with cruise employees conducted by the authors during three cruises.

Findings – Most cruise employees recognize that C2C relationships go beyond basic courtesy, contributing to satisfaction and the overall cruise experience. However, not all passengers are interested, as their relevance depends on travel companions and trip purpose. C2C relationships are rarely decisive when choosing a cruise. The study highlights the settings where these interactions occur—bars, entertainment venues, and shore excursions—and identifies customer segments more likely to engage in social interactions beyond simple courtesy.

Originality of the research – It contributes to C2C research in cruise tourism by incorporating a supply-side, employee-based perspective. The study shows how employees reveal the operational and spatial conditions through which these interactions emerge, are facilitated, constrained, and sometimes managed. In doing so, the paper provides a triangulated understanding of C2C interactions on cruise ships by connecting previous demand-side knowledge, frontline employee observations, and the operational-spatial conditions of the cruise ship environment.

Keywords crew, cruise industry, cruise employees, customer-to-customer interaction, tourist-to-tourist interaction

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INTRODUCTION

There is a consensus that tourism is a relational phenomenon, as it primarily occurs in social contexts that foster interpersonal encounters among tourists (Ryu et al., 2015). Social interaction plays a fundamental role in tourism (Rihova et al., 2015), although it is influenced by cultural factors (Song et al., 2018). The tourism industry involves various types of relationships, including those among consumers, service providers, and local residents (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Song et al., 2018). These relationships form part of the customer experience in the tourism sector (Li et al., 2023).

The focus of this research is on the relations between customers. Several terminologies have been identified in the academic literature referring to the same concept, which may present challenges when attempting to identify research on this topic. The most commonly employed terms are ‘Customer-to-Customer’ – C2C - (Rihova et al., 2015; Reichenberger, 2017; Rihova et al., 2018) and ‘Tourist-to-Tourist’ – T2T – (Sun et al., 2019; Adam, 2021; Li et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). Additional nomenclature includes ‘guest-to-guest’ – G2G - (Papathanassis, 2012), ‘pilgrim-to-pilgrim’ – P2P - (Casais & Sousa, 2020), and ‘voyager-to-voyager’ – V2V - (Paker & Gök, 2021a).

The academic literature consistently shows that customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions in service and tourism contexts create value for consumers by significantly shaping their travel experiences (Li et al., 2023). At the same time, these interactions also generate value for service providers (Heinonen et al., 2018; Malone et al., 2018; Pandey & Kumar, 2019). Firms that recognize and strategically manage different types of interpersonal customer relationships can therefore develop more effective strategies and enhance the overall customer experience, benefiting both consumers and service providers.

Among the various types of tourism activities, cruises provide a particularly relevant context for examining C2C interactions, since interpersonal relationships among passengers are part of the cruise experience and may influence passenger satisfaction (Di Vaio et al., 2022). However, what matters for satisfaction is not only the frequency of interaction, but also its emotional nature and valence, whether positive or negative (Huang & Hsu, 2010). Cruise ships constitute a distinctive social environment because of their confined space, maritime tradition, demographic composition, enclosed infrastructure, and prolonged periods of co-presence (Papathanassis & Beckmann, 2011; Papathanassis, 2012). In this sense, cruise passengers may be understood as a “short-lived society” in which social encounters have historically formed part of the travel experience (Yang, 2016; Ardeleanu, 2020).

Building on this view, the cruise ship is not simply a setting where C2C interactions occur, but a managed and temporary social ecosystem. Its enclosed environment, repeated proximity, shared itineraries, programmed leisure activities, high-density public spaces, and extended co-presence make C2C interactions more visible and operationally relevant than in many other hospitality contexts. Thus, the cruise setting advances understanding of the operational and contextual conditions under which C2C interactions emerge by showing how they are shaped by passenger motivations, spatial conditions, company programming, service routines, and employee observation.

The aim of this research is to explore the perception of social relationships beyond mere courtesy among cruise passengers (excluding family relationships and travel companions), from the perspective of employees. More specifically, the study considers natural and voluntary interactions that go beyond purely functional, informative, or courtesy-based contact. Brief greetings, informational questions, and incidental contacts without relational content are excluded. More concretely, four research questions are developed:

RQ1. How do cruise employees perceive the existence, nature, and relevance of C2C interactions beyond mere courtesy within the cruise ship as a temporary social environment?

RQ2. How do specific onboard and off-board settings facilitate or constrain C2C interactions among cruise passengers?

RQ3. Which passenger profiles, affinities, and travel configurations are perceived by employees as shaping passengers' willingness to engage in C2C interactions?

RQ4. How do cruise employees perceive the strategies used by cruise companies to facilitate, manage, or limit C2C interactions beyond mere courtesy?

In this study, C2C interactions are defined as voluntary passenger-to-passenger encounters that go beyond functional or courtesy-based contact and are shaped by the cruise servicescape and company practices. They are therefore understood not as purely spontaneous customer-driven events, but as social processes influenced by spatial design, activity programming, and service routines.

Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative approach based on 35 in-depth interviews with employees conducted on board. The relevance of this study lies not only in the limited attention given to employees in prior C2C cruise research but also in its capacity to provide a supply-side observational lens on the operational and spatial conditions under which C2C interactions emerge, are facilitated, constrained, and sometimes managed. Whereas passengers can describe their own encounters, employees repeatedly observe interactions across spaces, activities, service routines, time periods, and passenger configurations throughout the cruise. From a C2C research perspective, this lens shifts attention from passengers' subjective experiences to the conditions through which interactions are produced, observed, and operationally mediated. The employee perspective broadens the analysis of C2C interactions by addressing a key issue: although social interactions are socially voluntary processes, they can be operationally mediated by the shipscape through activity scheduling, spatial density management, service processes, and the observation and participation of front-line employees. Employees are therefore not only service providers, but also observers of the ship's social environment, able to identify patterns that help explain how C2C interactions become embedded in the cruise experience. Thus, this study contributes to a triangulation of perspectives by complementing demand-side research with context-based knowledge from the operational environment of the cruise ship (Papathanassis & Beckmann, 2011; Huang et al., 2023).

Following the Introduction, Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, Section 3 describes the methodology, Section 4 presents and discusses the findings, and Section 5 concludes with the main implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 C2C General Overview

Three studies have sought to summarize research on C2C interactions. Merinero- Rodríguez and Pulido-Fernández (2016) review the main lines of research on relationships in tourism, including the social sciences, community approach, tourism system, stakeholder approach, Tourism Cluster, and Tourism Networks. Heinonen et al. (2018) provide an extensive analysis of the drivers, types, and outcomes of C2C interactions. The primary drivers include the desire for information exchange, affection and social interaction, identification and shared interests, self-enhancement and approval, and customer abilities and resources, which may vary according to the provider and the situation. These interactions can be positive or negative (e.g., including verbal, physical, and contextual misbehavior). Li et al. (2023) review the most relevant topics analyzed from a T2T perspective, identifying interactive objects, situations, themes, methodologies, and theoretical underpinnings, while highlighting gaps in the existing research. Their analysis concludes that, although the number of articles on relationships in the tourism industry is increasing, the literature remains dispersed across various topics, such as interactive partners, situations, themes, methodologies, and theoretical approaches.

The empirical studies identified in customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions are primarily segmented, focusing on specific activities or customer profiles, and all are approached from the demand side. Murphy (2001) conducted a study from the perspective of backpackers. Ryu et al. (2015) examine older Japanese individuals, a segment with limited opportunities for

social interaction, allowing them to express themselves more freely, and who are significantly affected by loneliness (Song et al., 2018). Torres (2016) analyzes the behavior of a tour group over a two-week itinerary. Rihova et al. (2018) and Sun et al. (2019) focus on experiences at festivals. Casais & Sousa (2020) examine the behavior of pilgrims, while Chen et al. (2020) focus on business hotel stays, meaning that their results may not be generalizable to all types of hotels. Nguyen & Menezes (2025) develop a customer-dominant framework of value in the context of running events.

From the literature reviewed, there is a broad consensus that C2C interactions help to enhance tourists' emotional experiences and satisfaction—which may differ between men and women (Chen et al., 2022)—and impact the desire to stay, overall satisfaction, and loyalty (Sun et al., 2019; Choi & Kim, 2020). Rihova et al. (2018) identified 18 C2C practices, classifying them into four categories: affective, social, functional, and network value. Nguyen & Menezes (2025) classify C2C benefits into relational, participatory, private, and networking. Moreover, both positive and negative C2C interactions can respectively contribute to a positive or negative image of the destination (Yang, 2016). However, C2C interactions are not among the primary reasons for travel and are not significant predictors, as is the case with business hotels (Chen et al., 2020); instead, tourist-to-employee relations have a more pronounced effect, particularly for senior customers (Song et al., 2018). Additionally, some studies indicate that negative C2C interactions can lead to dissatisfaction, generating value destruction and negatively influencing post-purchase customer behavior intentions (Adam, 2021).

Literature also endorses the importance of tourism companies to develop a deeper understanding of their customers' behavior, including inter-customer relationships (Nguyen & Menezes, 2025). A greater understanding of C2C interactions by providers enables them to anticipate and offer services and activities that enhance customer satisfaction. This improved customer experience, in turn, fosters positive referrals about the provider, boosts customer loyalty (Heinonen et al., 2018; Pandey & Kumar, 2019), and strengthens customer commitment to the provider, as seen in initiatives such as running activities (Nguyen & Menezes, 2025).

Rihova et al. (2015) propose classifying C2C interactions into three levels: (1) travel companions – family members, friends, or relatives within the same group; (2) interactions within the social bubble – social ties that are not travel companions; and (3) unfamiliar interactions between tourists – other types of relationships. Additionally, Song et al. (2018) suggest that Chinese seniors may rely more on family interactions than on broader social interactions. Li et al. (2023) adopt this classification in their study and conclude that most T2T research focuses on unfamiliar relationships. These interactions provide travelers with “novelty and unfamiliarity” (Li et al., 2023, p. 168), allowing them to express themselves without inhibitions or responsibilities, as most interactions consist of simple conversations (Reichenberger, 2017; Cohen & Cohen, 2019; Lin et al., 2019). Furthermore, Zhou et al. (2023) analyze the effect of T2T interactions on behavior by differentiating two types: tourist-to-companion (T2C) and tourist-to-stranger (T2S). Their findings indicate that T2C interactions affect tourists' behavioral intentions both directly and indirectly through positive emotions and memorable tourism experiences, whereas T2S interactions influence behavioral intentions indirectly through these mediators, without a direct impact.

Taken together, the general C2C/T2T literature suggests that customer-to-customer interactions should be examined not only in terms of their existence or frequency but also in terms of the conditions that enable, constrain, and shape them. Three perspectives are particularly relevant for the present study. First, value co-creation and co-destruction perspectives show that C2C interactions may enhance the experience, but may also generate discomfort, conflict, or dissatisfaction when interactions are unwanted or problematic (Heinonen et al., 2018; Malone et al., 2018; Adam, 2021). Second, perceived similarity, affinity, and customer homogeneity help explain why customers may interact more easily when they share language, age, interests, travel configuration, or activity preferences (Wu, 2007; Song et al., 2018). Third, customer-dominant and provider-facilitation perspectives suggest that companies may create conditions for interaction without fully controlling customer-to-customer relationships (Rihova et al., 2018; Nguyen & Menezes, 2025). These perspectives inform the study in complementary ways: value co-creation and co-destruction are used to interpret the experiential consequences of C2C interactions; perceived similarity, affinity, and homogeneity inform the analysis of passenger profiles and their willingness to interact; and provider facilitation helps explain how cruise companies, through employee observation and service design, may shape interaction opportunities without fully controlling them.

1.2 C2C in the cruise industry

Despite the recognized importance of customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions in shaping the customer experience, research specifically addressing C2C interactions within the cruise industry remains limited. Li et al. (2023) reviewed 85 articles published between 2011 and 2020 and found that none focused explicitly on the cruise industry. Furthermore, a search of the Web of Science and Scopus databases—conducted using titles, abstracts, and author keywords—identified only a small number of studies adopting a demand-side perspective (Huang & Hsu, 2009, 2010; Papathanassis, 2012; Brejla & Gilbert, 2014; Paker & Gök, 2021a, 2021b). Notably, the latter two studies examine small vessels with a maximum capacity of 20 people, including crew, which are not comparable to conventional cruise ships. Accordingly, the present study investigates C2C interactions in the cruise industry as a component of the customer experience. These interactions have become increasingly influential due to the growth of social networking platforms, which facilitate the sharing of experiences before, during, and after the cruise itinerary (Di Vaio et al., 2018).

Cruise passengers experience different types of C2C interactions. Huang and Hsu (2009), in their qualitative study, categorize these interactions into three groups. The first group, characterized by minimal interaction (four participants), involves superficial exchanges with negligible impact, such as brief interactions during shore excursions or while dining, or no interaction at all. The second group, representing a moderate level of interaction (four participants), consists of passengers who share their experiences with others they had not previously known. The third group, which reflects the highest level of interaction, includes passengers who form close relationships, making these interactions one of the highlights of their cruise experience. Papathanassis (2012) classifies guest-to-guest (G2G) interactions into three categories: encounter intensity, primarily occurring during shore excursions; encounter regularity, largely related to shared meals and the development of rituals; and interaction utility, which involves common cruise experiences, shared motives and expectations, and the sharing of interests. Brejla and Gilbert (2014) propose three categories of interaction based on previous literature, such as Duman and Mattila (2005): hedonism, referring to engagement in memorable social interactions; novelty, associated with meeting new people, seeking new experiences, and becoming part of onboard culture; and control, reflecting a sense of ability to influence the outcomes of interactions with other guests.

Overall, the literature agrees that C2C interactions in the cruise industry have a positive impact on customer experience, satisfaction, and loyalty (e.g., Huang & Hsu, 2010; Di Vaio et al., 2022). The reduction of C2C interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the customer experience (Castillo-Manzano et al., 2025). Ali et al. (2022) identify social interaction as one of four dimensions of the cruise experience—alongside hedonism and escapism; recognition and self-esteem; and activities and facilities—which are critical predictors of satisfaction and loyalty. Social interaction is not always an end in itself but rather a context in which individuals validate their identity, success, and well-being (Miles, 2019), with cabins representing an important social refuge (Papathanassis, 2012). G2G interactions appear to be particularly significant when satisfaction with core services is relatively low (Brejla & Gilbert, 2014). However, although C2C interactions are a source of value co-creation (Brejla & Gilbert, 2014; Yang, 2016; Ali et al., 2022) and can influence destination image (Yang, 2016), they may also lead to value co-destruction. Specifically, dysfunctional behaviors—such as excessive noise, queue jumping, poor hygiene, or rudeness (Papathanassis, 2012; Radic, 2018; Paker & Gök, 2021b)—can create a tense atmosphere (Huang & Hsu, 2009), undermine satisfaction, and negatively affect the cruise passenger experience, thereby posing a risk to cruise companies. Most of the literature identified has been developed from a demand-side perspective, and no study has specifically examined how crew members perceive these relationships.

These general perspectives are especially relevant in the cruise context because cruise ships are extended, enclosed, and highly programmed service environments. Unlike many hospitality settings in which customer encounters are brief or spatially dispersed, cruise ships involve repeated proximity, shared itineraries, common consumption spaces, programmed leisure activities, and prolonged co-presence. From a servicescape perspective, the cruise ship can therefore be understood as a shipscape in which spatial configuration, crowding, ambiance, service routines, and port-of-call interfaces may shape the likelihood and quality of C2C interactions (Di Vaio et al., 2018; Lyu et al., 2017; Liu-Lastres & Pratt, 2025; Gonzáles-Santiago et al., 2025). This also links C2C interactions to broader cruise outcomes, including satisfaction, loyalty, word of mouth, and sustainable or pro-social behavior (Di Vaio et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2022).

The literature identifies several settings in which cruise passengers engage in C2C interactions. Restaurants—particularly main dining rooms—emerge as the primary context, as they have the potential to transform encounters among strangers into long-term relationships (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Papathanassis, 2012; Radic et al., 2021). Conversely, buffet restaurants may inhibit C2C interactions due to crowding and queuing (Papathanassis, 2012; Liu-Lastres & Pratt, 2025). Additional settings include public rooms and lounges, which function as social nodes (Brejla & Gilbert, 2014; Risitano et al., 2022), as well as organized activities and clubs (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Ali et al., 2022). Shore excursions also warrant attention, as shared interests and cultural experiences foster more intense C2C interactions (Papathanassis, 2012; Yang, 2016). Accordingly, ports of call represent a significant source of C2C interactions (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Di Vaio et al., 2018). These studies further support the view that proximity, repeated encounters, shared spaces, programmed activities, and crowding may influence whether passenger-to-passenger interactions are positive, irrelevant, or problematic. Cruise C2C interactions should therefore be understood as socially and spatially embedded processes rather than isolated customer encounters.

The literature also identifies passenger profiles that are more inclined toward C2C interactions, including experienced cruisers (Yarnal, 2004; Huang & Hsu, 2010; Papadopoulou & Xesfingi, 2023), women, older and retired travelers (Yarnal, 2004), and passengers on longer cruises—often frequent cruisers for whom social interaction constitutes a key motive for repeat travel (Yarnal & Kerstetter, 2005). Additional groups include LGBTQ+ travelers (Wong & Lai, 2025) and passengers traveling on small ships (Paker & Gök, 2021a,b). Paker and Gök (2021a,b) further conclude that perceived similarity with other customers is positively related to the likelihood and intensity of interactions with fellow passengers.

Given the relevance of C2C interactions, cruise companies have implemented various initiatives to encourage social engagement among passengers. Specifically, in some cases, large shared tables are arranged during formal dinners to stimulate interaction; open-seating dining systems are adopted to provide flexibility in meeting new guests; and extended service hours are offered to foster more relaxed social environments (Huang & Hsu, 2009, 2010; Papathanassis, 2012; Radic et al., 2021).

Moreover, cruise lines organize dedicated social events to further promote passenger interaction (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Ali et al., 2022). To facilitate these contacts, digital tools and platforms are provided (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Brejla & Gilbert, 2014; Di Vaio et al., 2022), and crew members are trained to encourage and manage social interactions among guests (Papathanassis, 2012; Risitano et al., 2022).

Therefore, the cruise context provides a particularly suitable setting for examining how C2C interactions are not only experienced by passengers, but also observed, facilitated, and managed within a specific servicescape and organizational environment.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology involving interviews with crew members. In fact, due to the exploratory nature of this research, which focuses on ‘variants of a particular social setting and the experiences arising within it’ (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 493), a qualitative methodology is recommended. In their analysis of 85 articles, Li et al. (2023) found that 50% of the studies published employed a qualitative methodology, either entirely or partially. From the perspective of the cruise industry, seminal studies include those of Huang & Hsu (2009), which involved 18 interviews with cruise passengers, and Papathanassis (2012), who conducted 76 interviews.

Specifically, 35 employees from various departments were interviewed during three cruises in 2024 and 2025: 20 interviews were conducted in April 2024 aboard the MSC Grandiosa, 9 interviews were conducted in July 2024 aboard the MSC Musica, and 6 interviews were conducted in January 2025 aboard the MSC Euribia. The qualitative research continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new insights were anticipated (Flick, 2006). MSC is the world’s leading independent cruise line, with a 12% market share in terms of passenger capacity (www.cruisemarketwatch.com). All three ships have high passenger capacities: MSC Grandiosa (built in 2019) accommodates 6,334 passengers and has 1,704 crew members; MSC Musica (built in 2006) accommodates 3,223 passengers and has 987 crew members; and MSC Euribia (built in 2023) accommodates 6,327 passengers and has 1,711 crew members. The relatively small sample size is not considered a limitation in this type of study, as the aim is to surface ideas rather than to verify them (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). The opportunities for C2C interactions may also depend on the itinerary, particularly if the itinerary includes multiple homeports. For instance, in the case of the Emirates itinerary (7 nights), which included three homeports—Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Dubai—it was more difficult for passengers to meet new people (int. 35).

The sampling and recruitment process was based on non-probabilistic opportunistic (convenience) sampling within a closed space with restricted access and during specific navigation periods. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The qualitative analysis covered several departments (Table 1) to provide a comprehensive overview: Food and Beverage (11), Entertainment (including the nightclub and swimming pool) (8), Customer Service (6), Shore Excursions (4), and Gymnasium—SPA (3). Other departments included Future Cruises (1), Photography (1), and Spanish-speaking Customer Representative (1). Some employees indicated that C2C interactions take place in various spaces, such as bars, excursions, swimming pools, spas, or designated smoking areas (int. 32, 34). The selection of departments was guided by the locations where the literature has identified greater potential for C2C interactions (Section 2, paragraph 4). In terms of gender, 20 interviews were conducted with female employees and 15 with male employees.

The interviews were conducted in person by the authors. One author conducted the interviews during the 2024 cruises, while the other conducted those during the 2025 cruise. It is worth noting that it is uncommon for researchers themselves to experience the cruise, although there are exceptions, such as Torres (2016), who was part of the team analyzing a cruise group. Access to ships is generally restricted to passengers due to security and logistical reasons (Gibson, 2008). This restriction facilitated alignment between the interview procedure and the study’s objectives, allowing for greater control over the empirical process (Reichenberger, 2017) and enhancing the authenticity of the data, which is particularly relevant in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2002). The interviews were conducted on board, in the spaces where crew members carried out their duties. Participants were contacted through direct interaction without formal intermediation, thereby minimizing operational disruption. There was no presence or influence of supervisors, nor any selection of participants by managers, ensuring that power dynamics did not affect the nature of the responses. No explicit refusals were encountered during the recruitment process; however, in some cases, employees were initially reluctant to participate, as is often observed in the cruise industry (Sehkarani & Sevcikova, 2011). Therefore, assuring confidentiality, as commonly practiced in such contexts (Gibson, 2008), was essential.

Interviewees were first informed about the aims of the study and the definition of social relations: “Social interaction is understood as the relationship established between two or more passengers based on a natural and voluntary desire to maintain a conversation beyond an informative or courtesy-based intention. Interactions do not include brief greetings, informational questions, or incidental contacts without relational content.” The interviews followed a semi-structured format with open-ended questions, allowing for flexibility and a less formal approach. This enabled participants to express their perceptions in their own words. For example, interview questions included: “Do you think passengers seek to establish social relationships with each other? If so, what kinds of relationships are established? Are there any observations or curiosities you would like to share?” Clarifications were provided when necessary to facilitate the collection of more precise information (Reichenberger, 2017).

Data were collected manually and transcribed for subsequent analysis. Interview duration ranged from 10 to 75 minutes. This research performs an extensive and qualitative analysis based on a single cruise line (MSC) in three different itineraries and specific geographical contexts. This delimited empirical framework was intentionally selected to allow for close observation of customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions while maintaining a constant service design and organizational practices. Therefore, the study is designed to generate context-specific insights into C2C interactions rather than statistically representative findings for the entire sector.

An exhaustive analysis of the interview content was conducted through individual analysis using QDA Miner, qualitative data analysis software. The software supported a structured coding process of the interviews with cruise employees. A hybrid inductive–deductive coding strategy was developed in two phases. In the first phase, an initial coding scheme was designed based on the existing literature on C2C interactions in tourism and cruise contexts, allowing for the identification of the main analytical categories. In the second phase, open inductive coding was applied to identify emerging analytical categories not anticipated in the initial framework. This iterative process allowed the coding structure to be refined until analytical stability was achieved. During the coding phase, the analysis was conducted by a single researcher. Consistency was subsequently reinforced through a code–recode procedure conducted after a time interval. An example of the coding process is provided in Table 2.

Table 1: People interviewed: date of interview, department, and sex

CODE	DATE	DEPARTMENT	SEX
1	19/04/2024	FOOD AND BEVERAGE	MALE
2	19/04/2024	FOOD AND BEVERAGE	MALE
3	20/04/2024	CUSTOMER SERVICE	FEMALE
4	20/04/2024	CUSTOMER SERVICE	MALE
5	20/04/2024	FOOD AND BEVERAGE	FEMALE
6	20/04/2024	FOOD AND BEVERAGE	MALE
7	20/04/2024	FOOD AND BEVERAGE	FEMALE
8	20/04/2024	GYM	MALE
9	20/04/2024	SWIMMING POOL	MALE
10	21/04/2024	DISCOTHEQUE	MALE
11	21/04/2024	ENTERTAINMENT	FEMALE
12	21/04/2024	ENTERTAINMENT	FEMALE
13	21/04/2024	FOOD AND BEVERAGE	MALE
14	21/04/2024	SHORE EXCURSIONS	FEMALE
15	21/04/2024	SHORE EXCURSIONS	FEMALE
16	22/04/2024	CUSTOMER SERVICE	FEMALE
17	22/04/2024	ENTERTAINMENT	FEMALE
18	22/04/2024	ENTERTAINMENT	FEMALE
19	22/04/2024	ENTERTAINMENT	FEMALE
20	22/04/2024	FOOD AND BEVERAGE	MALE
21	07/07/2024	CUSTOMER SERVICE	FEMALE
22	07/07/2024	GYM	MALE
23	07/07/2024	SPA	FEMALE
24	08/07/2024	FOOD AND BEVERAGE	MALE
25	09/07/2024	FOOD AND BEVERAGE	MALE
26	09/07/2024	FOOD AND BEVERAGE	MALE
27	09/07/2024	PHOTOGRAPHY	MALE
28	10/07/2024	ENTERTAINMENT	MALE
29	10/07/2024	SHORE EXCURSIONS	FEMALE
30	07/01/2025	CUSTOMER SERVICE	FEMALE
31	07/01/2025	CUSTOMER SERVICE	FEMALE
32	07/01/2025	FUTURE CRUISES	FEMALE
33	07/01/2025	SHORE EXCURSIONS	FEMALE
34	07/01/2025	SPANISH-SPEAKING CUSTOMER REPRESENTATIVE	FEMALE
35	09/01/2025	FOOD AND BEVERAGE (IN AN ISLAND)	FEMALE

Table 2: Overview of the coding framework

Parent Code (Main category)	Sub-codes (examples)	Illustrative quotation
Perception of C2C beyond courtesy	Clear recognition; Conditional; Limited	“It’s hard to have fun on your own” (Int. 19)
Interaction settings	Bar–Restaurant; Entertainment; Shore excursions; Gym–Spa	“When you bring together a group of people engaged in the same tourist activity, who speak the same language and share an interest in visiting the same site, human relations are inevitable” (Int. 14)
Type of relationship	Friendship; Romantic; Continued ties	“Politeness becomes courtesy, courtesy becomes cordiality, cordiality becomes familiarity, and familiarity becomes friendship” (Int. 25)
Passenger profiles	Age/life stage; Culture/language; First-time cruisers	“Couples who feel out of place during the first few days and seek to integrate into the dynamics of the ship” (Int. 29)
Company facilitation	Dining allocation; Activities/events; Beverage packages	“Our company, our philosophy, and our management teams ask us and encourage us to get cruise passengers to participate, interact, and socialize.” (Int. 12)

The “meaning unit” was used as the unit of analysis, defined as the smallest fragment containing a complete idea relevant to the object of study, not necessarily corresponding to a grammatical sentence. Consequently, a single sentence could include more than one meaning unit if it referred to different analytical dimensions. To avoid the risk of micro-fragmentation, segmentation was intentionally restricted to conceptually complete and coherent units. In line with this preventive approach, results were counted and structured at the interview level (case-level incidence) rather than at the coded fragment level. Each thematic category was counted at most once per interview, regardless of the number of excerpts associated with it (e.g., 25 interviews indicating a “clear existence of C2C interactions beyond courtesy”). Overlapping codes were only permitted when a single fragment clearly addressed distinct analytical units. Such overlaps were used to support interpretative analysis rather than frequency-based comparisons. These procedures contributed to methodological rigor, facilitating both qualitative interpretation and transparent presentation of findings while preventing artificial inflation of frequencies. With the aim of synthesizing and providing analytical clarity, Table 3 presents a relevant example of the model applied to the entire code book of the co-occurrence analysis. This table presents a selection that illustrates the relationship between interaction spaces and relational results of the C2C.

Table 3. Case-level co-occurrence between interaction settings and C2C relational outcomes (n = 35)

Interaction setting ↓ / Relational outcome →	Clear C2C beyond courtesy	Friendship	Continued relationships
Bar–Restaurant	19	16	7
Entertainment venues	18	14	5
Shore excursions	11	8	6
Gym & Spa	5	3	1

Note: Co-occurrence values represent the number of interviews in which both the interaction setting and the relational outcome were identified at least once. Each co-occurrence was counted a maximum of one time per interview, regardless of the number of coded excerpts.

The procedures described constitute the first level of methodological reliability. To further enhance the credibility of the study, iterative follow-up questions and clarifications were encouraged when necessary; peer debriefing sessions were held among researchers to question and validate interpretations; and, when feasible, depending on the interview context, member checks were conducted with participants to confirm and summarize key points at the end of the interview. An audit file was developed documenting the participant selection process, interview contexts, and potential coding iterations to strengthen dependability. In addition, reflexive notes were produced to identify and describe the role of the researchers as passengers with access to ship contexts and to the professionals interviewed. These notes represent a conscious, reflexive effort to minimize prior biases during the coding process. Finally, a thick description of the ships, itineraries, onboard departments, and interaction contexts was developed, enabling assessment of the transferability of the findings to other cruise settings.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are structured according to the four research questions. First, the analysis examines employees’ overall perception of C2C interactions beyond mere courtesy. Second, it identifies the settings in which these interactions emerge. Third, it explores the passenger profiles associated with these interactions. Finally, it analyses the perceived role of cruise companies in facilitating, managing, or limiting such interactions.

3.1 Overall perception

In response to RQ1, most cruise ship employees agreed that, on board, customer-to-customer (C2C) relations between passengers extend beyond simple courtesy. Interviewee 16 (Customer Service) noted: “Of course. What would people prefer: an empty cruise ship all to themselves, or a cruise ship with other people on it?” Similarly, interviewee 19 (Entertainment) stated that “It’s hard to have fun on your own”. Several employees emphasized the inherently social nature of the cruise experience (int. 11, 15, 21, 24, 29), particularly in confined spaces (int. 20, 21), where interactions tend to emerge spontaneously (int. 12, 15, 22, 30, 31, 32). Given these conditions, C2C interactions beyond basic courtesy are often unavoidable unless passengers actively choose to avoid them (int. 12, 15, 18, 24). As previously suggested by Yarnal and Kerstetter (2005), limited space on board simultaneously enables social engagement and personal distancing. In this respect, interviewee 25 (Food and Beverage) explained: “Politeness becomes courtesy, courtesy becomes cordiality, cordiality becomes familiarity, and familiarity becomes friendship”. Nevertheless, not all interactions are equally significant or intense. Travel motivations, travel mode (alone, as a couple, in groups, or with family), and diverse contexts and social ecosystems explain the contingent and non-universal nature of C2C relations. In fact, interviewees 13 and 20 (Food and Beverage) acknowledged that while such interactions may occur, they are not among passengers’ primary objectives. Only one employee disagreed with the prevailing view. Interviewee 23 (Spa) argued: “We want to offer passengers a relaxing space where they can enjoy themselves, rest, and disconnect from the crowds. I believe that people want to be at peace”. Overall, these findings are consistent with those discussed in the literature review. An additional insight provided by interviewee 34 suggests that C2C relations are more limited on itineraries with multiple ports of embarkation and disembarkation, such as the MSC *Euribia* itinerary.

Although employees did not elaborate extensively on specific types of C2C relationships beyond courtesy, most believed that these interactions generally lead to casual friendships (17 employees). In some cases, however, they evolve into new travel companionships, facilitated by technological advancements (int. 28, Entertainment), with passengers even booking future cruises together (int. 32, 33). Occasionally, new romantic relationships also emerge. Interviewee 32 (Future Cruises) shared a particularly emotional account of two couples—one Italian and one Swiss—who met on a cruise years ago, traveled together for many years, and, following the loss of both spouses, continued traveling as a new couple.

Consistent with the literature review, C2C interactions form part of the overall customer experience, contributing to higher satisfaction and fostering loyalty (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Di Vaio et al., 2022; Paker & Gök, 2021b). Several employees highlighted the importance of interactions beyond simple courtesy in enhancing satisfaction (int. 2, 9, 11, 13, 16, 19, 28). As interviewee 13 (Food and Beverage) explained: “Passengers come to have fun and, if they can do it with others, even better”. Overall, the findings support previous findings that C2C interactions can generate value co-creation. However, the enclosed nature of cruise ships may also give rise to negative experiences stemming from uncomfortable encounters, such as conflicts in buffet areas or elevators (int. 34), representing instances of value co-destruction, in line with prior research (Papathanassis, 2012; Radic, 2018; Paker & Gök, 2021b). Interviewee 34 further suggested that social media may help mitigate these negative experiences by softening their emotional impact and reducing perceived dissatisfaction.

The findings of this subsection refine previous demand-side research by showing that, although employees perceive cruise ships as socially enabling environments, interaction is not equally desired or meaningful for all passengers. Consistent with Huang and Hsu (2010) and Papathanassis (2012), the key issue is not the existence of C2C interaction itself, but its relevance, emotional meaning, and alignment with passengers’ travel motivations.

3.2 Settings that facilitate or constrain C2C interactions beyond mere courtesy

In response to RQ2, the role of space in tourism activities has been widely emphasized, as it facilitates multiple forms of social interaction, particularly in the cruise sector (Song et al., 2018; Duman & Mattila, 2005; Yarnal & Kerstetter, 2005; Huang & Hsu, 2009; Papathanassis, 2012; Brejla & Gilbert, 2014; Ardeleanu, 2020; Paker & Gök, 2021a, b). Based on the analysis of employees’ comments, four distinct spaces were identified as particularly conducive to customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions beyond simple courtesy, as also highlighted by Brejla and Gilbert (2014).

Bars and restaurants. Gastronomic spaces clearly emerge as key venues for C2C interactions, consistent with previous research (e.g., Huang & Hsu, 2010; Papathanassis, 2012; Radic et al., 2021). Employees distinguished three main types: guest-selected bars and restaurants, buffets, and shared tables. In guest-selected venues, interactions are driven by passengers’ own decisions, which often enhances enjoyment: “I see lots of people, some looking at their mobile phones, others staring at the ceiling, but others gathering together with beers or mojitos. I don’t know if they knew each other before, but what I do know is that they are having a good time drinking and laughing” (int. 2, Food and Beverage). Similarly, interviewee 25 (Food and Beverage) noted that “When friends come together, whether they’re coming from the ground or on board, soirées get much longer”. Buffets, although also guest-selected, were frequently mentioned as a major source of dissatisfaction and value co-destruction due to queues (int. 1; int. 34). Shared tables, by contrast, are organised by the cruise company, often grouping passengers by language or nationality, although the decision to interact ultimately remains with guests: “Restaurants already try to encourage guests to interact with each other;

we seat them at tables with people from the same country or, at the very least, who speak the same language. From there, it is up to the passengers themselves to decide whether they want to connect, whether they just want to share a table, or, as sometimes happens, they come on the first night, meet, don't like each other, and don't come back" (int. 1, Food and Beverage).

Entertainment spaces (including discotheque and swimming pool). Entertainment venues are common meeting points where spontaneous interactions frequently occur during both daytime and evening activities. Several employees stressed the importance of these interactions in giving meaning to their work (int. 11, 12, 18, 28): "... Ultimately, most of the activities we offer as part of the entertainment program would not be possible without the active participation of the passengers, and this usually requires them to interact with each other. From my perspective, which is activities in the pool area, I personally like to create games that involve team building, where winning means not only having fun, but also collaborating with each other. From that experience, they end up greeting each other later during the cruise, commenting on how much fun they had and finally deciding to have a drink together" (int. 28).

Shore excursions. Shore excursions were identified as a particularly important context for C2C interactions, as passengers share a common interest in the destination, often the same language, and spend extended periods together (int. 14, 15, 29, 34). These interactions may differ from those occurring on board (int. 35; Di Vaio et al., 2022). As int. 14 (Shore excursions) noted, "After an excursion, especially the first one, people return with a different attitude, a new impression of what a cruise represents beyond the biases they may have had. It's much more than just putting people in a place where they can't leave. From my experience, I can tell you that when you bring together a group of people engaged in the same tourist activity, who speak the same language and share an interest in visiting the same site, human relations are inevitable. We put people on a coach to visit one location, spend the entire day together, and return to the ship together. In the end, the same faces are recognized, and when you run into someone again, they become familiar." This observation aligns with Yarnal and Kerstetter (2005) and Torres (2016), who emphasized the experiential intensity of excursions. According to Papathanassis (2012), shore excursions also function as a group-to-group (G2G) interaction context primarily driven by intensity.

Gymnasium and spa. These spaces are generally associated with relaxation and personal time. As interviewee 23 (Spa) stated, "I think people want to be calm". The gymnasium is not perceived as a primary site for social interaction, although repeated encounters may lead to familiarity or friendship (int. 8, 22): "Here in the gym, people who train at the same time every day can form friendships, although I think people come here to disconnect. They may come with friends they've made throughout the cruise" (int. 22, Gymnasium). The role of spa and fitness facilities in the cruise industry has also been noted by Brejla and Gilbert (2014).

Finally, some C2C interactions also occur in smoking areas, waiting zones, corridors, and other common spaces, although these interactions tend to remain brief and casual (int. 3, 28, 34).

The findings suggest that spaces are not neutral but act as filters for interaction. Repeated proximity and shared consumption settings can transform casual encounters into more meaningful C2C interactions. In line with Papathanassis (2012) and Brejla and Gilbert (2014), some environments encourage interaction through shared activities and repeated encounters, while others discourage it because of crowding or unwanted proximity.

3.3 Perception of customer profiles engaging in C2C interactions beyond mere courtesy

In response to RQ3, some employees were very explicit in identifying passenger profiles, whereas others were unable to do so (18 employees identified one or more segments). However, two employees noted that passenger profiles vary by itinerary (weekly), making it difficult to establish consistent patterns (int. 30, 31).

Cruise employees identified a wide range of profiles that are more inclined towards customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions. First, young people and groups of friends (int. 5, 10, 20). Interviewee 5 (Food and Beverage) recalled an Italian group that socialized every night: "They joined six or seven tables, did not know each other initially, but eventually became friends. The entire dinner shift referred to them as 'spaghetti'; they became famous". Second, passengers sharing common interests, culture, and age (int. 1, 13, 20, 28), reinforcing the role of cultural values in tourism experiences (Song et al., 2018). Third, solo travelers and single passengers (int. 32, 34). Fourth, first-time cruisers (int. 19, Entertainment; int. 29, Shore Excursions), described as "couples who feel out of place during the first few days and seek to integrate into the dynamics of the ship". Fifth, some families seek contact with other families (int. 9, 18).

Conversely, several profiles were identified as less interested or more reticent towards C2C interactions. First, some families and couples (int. 10, 30, 31). As interviewee 30 (Customer Service) stated: "There are many people who travel with their families, and in this way they already have the relationship". Second, passengers seeking relaxation and tranquillity (int. 8, 22, 23). Third, passengers from the MSC Yacht Club—an exclusive segment within MSC—who seek privacy and exclusivity (int. 32, 34). Fourth, shy passengers who do not perceive cruising as a social activity (int. 28).

Information regarding passenger nationality also emerged as relevant. Latin, Spanish, Italian, and Brazilian passengers (int. 32, 34, 35) were perceived as more interested in C2C interactions, whereas some northern European nationalities—French, German, and Russian—were described as more reserved (int. 32, 34). Nevertheless, as interviewee 35 (Food and Beverage) noted, “At the end of the night, when passengers are ‘happier,’ different nationalities tend to come together.” High levels of social activity at night facilitate encounters and the organization of meetings for subsequent days (int. 12). It should be noted that nationality-related differences are often associated with language (int. 18), travel configuration, and the nature of on-board activities rather than nationality itself; therefore, culturally driven interaction patterns should be interpreted with caution.

In sum, a wide range of segmentation criteria was identified, providing valuable insights for cruise companies’ decision-making. The importance of tourist homogeneity in facilitating C2C interactions has been previously highlighted in tourism research (Wu, 2007; Ryu et al., 2015; Song et al., 2018) and specifically within the cruise industry (Paker & Gök, 2021a).

These profiles should be understood as situational tendencies rather than fixed categories. Consistent with Wu (2007), Song et al. (2018), and Paker and Gök (2021a), perceived similarity in factors such as language, interests, age, or travel situation may encourage C2C interaction, although nationality or demographics alone do not determine it.

3.4 Employees’ perceptions of company strategies for facilitating, managing, and limiting C2C interactions

RQ4 was particularly difficult to answer due to the sensitive nature of the information, which explains why only 16 employees responded.

Encouraging interaction between passengers forms part of cruise companies’ strategy to deliver a superior customer experience that enhances satisfaction and loyalty, as discussed in the literature review. At the same time, cruise companies must respect passengers who seek tranquillity and exclusivity. Several employees emphasised passenger satisfaction as a key factor underpinning customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions (int. 12, 15, 21, 30, 31, 32), which is expected to generate positive word-of-mouth and loyalty (int. 33). As interviewee 15 (Shore Excursions) stated, “cruises are a business”, and there is a clear incentive to increase satisfaction, as happier passengers tend to spend more (int. 15). Some employees indicated that facilitating C2C interactions is central to their roles, particularly in entertainment (int. 11, 12, 18, 28). This aligns with the cruise industry’s expectation of exceptionally high service quality (Sehkan & Sevcikova, 2011). Exceptionally, interviewee 28 (Entertainment) did not perceive a link between C2C interactions and increased spending: “I don’t think that making friends leads you to buy more watches or sunglasses, or to go to the spa or the entertainment areas”. Overall, all strategies must prioritize privacy to ensure customer satisfaction (int. 30, 31).

Based on employees’ comments, several strategies deserve particular attention:

Food and Beverage. In this area, multiple strategies were identified. First, at shared tables, cruise companies tend to allocate seating based on nationality, language, age, or shared interests, where possible, to foster a pleasant dining atmosphere and facilitate conversation (int. 1, 5, 25, 26, 34). As interviewee 5 (Food and Beverage) recalled, “Once I saw a group of two couples, and the first night they said, ‘It is us! Do you remember?’ I told them, ‘Yes, I was your waiter.’ They replied, ‘Well, we’ve come with this couple we met on another cruise!’” Conversely, as interviewee 1 (Food and Beverage) explained, “On the first night, they meet, and if they don’t feel comfortable, most of them don’t return to that table.” Second, cruise lines offer drink packages that include unlimited consumption of selected beverages, depending on the package purchased. For example, MSC provides the “Easy Package” (€40/day) and the “Easy Package Plus” (€54/day). These packages may encourage both C2C interactions and consumption (int. 21, 22). However, interviewee 26 (Food and Beverage) noted that “Encouraging social interaction to generate consumption is particularly interesting for the company when there is no ‘drinks package’, as this involves a direct expense for each additional drink”.

Shore excursions. Passenger satisfaction is a priority in this context, and participants are therefore commonly grouped by language (int. 14, 34).

Entertainment and events. Employees identified several activities designed to promote C2C interactions, including events for singles, such as cocktails or social gatherings (int. 32, 33); welcome-back events and MSC Voyager Cocktail events for members of the loyalty programme (int. 32); and activities for ‘Solo Travellers’ and LGBTQI+ groups (int. 34). As interviewee 12 (Entertainment) highlighted: “I don’t think they seek them out, they just find them on their own. I mean, it’s very difficult not to socialize on a cruise unless you don’t want to. In fact, one of our roles is precisely to get cruise passengers to socialize. Our company, our philosophy, and our management teams ask us, encourage us to get cruise passengers to participate, interact, and socialize. It’s very satisfying when we succeed”.

As participants in the three analyzed itineraries, the authors observed that the cruise company provides passengers with a daily program. While this information was previously delivered in paper format, it is now available exclusively through the cruise line’s mobile application. The program includes port schedules (except on navigation days), an hour-by-hour list of onboard activities,

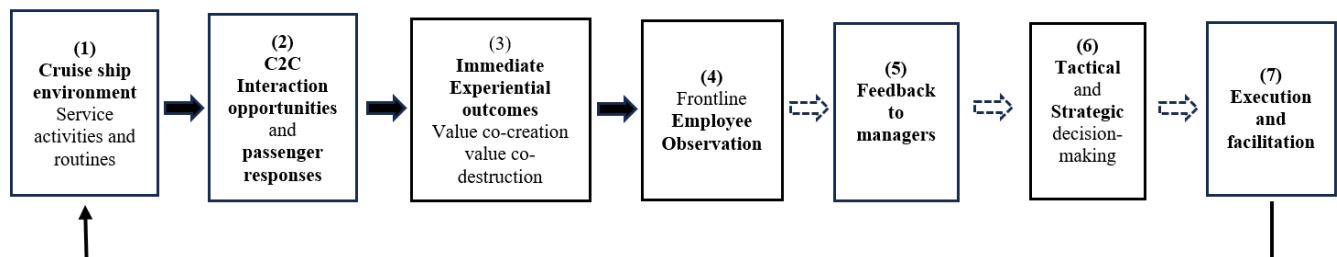
and additional information such as weather updates and special offers. Analysis of this program revealed numerous activities consistent with interviewees' accounts, particularly those facilitating C2C interactions, including games, diverse entertainment and sports options, and specific events for single passengers or LGBTQ+ segments.

In conclusion, cruise companies actively facilitate C2C interactions to enhance passenger satisfaction and improve the overall cruise experience. This finding aligns with previous research, such as Torres (2016), who reported similar dynamics in a bus itinerary context. The strategic role of cruise providers in fostering C2C relationships and strengthening passengers' bonds with the company has also been highlighted by Nguyen and Menezes (2025), who classify these strategies as enhancing, connecting, attaching, and partnering. Similarly, Yarnal and Kerstetter (2005) emphasized the influence of cruise staff on passenger interactions, particularly in entertainment settings. In this context, transparent practices are essential, as noted by Malone et al. (2018), to ensure ethical engagement and maintain trust.

The managerial implication is not to maximize passenger interaction, but to create conditions that facilitate voluntary interaction. This aligns with Heinonen et al. (2018) and Nguyen and Menezes (2025), while recognizing that co-creation may become co-destruction when interactions are intrusive or poorly managed (Malone et al., 2018).

Based on the findings, an employee-informed managerial framework is proposed (Figure 1). The framework shows how frontline employee observations within the cruise ship environment may be communicated to managers and may inform managerial decisions about spatial configuration, activity programming, service routines, and staff facilitation. These decisions aim to support voluntary customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions, contribute to customer satisfaction, and reduce the risk of value co-destruction. The framework should be viewed as a managerial application of the findings, illustrating how employee observations can guide managerial decisions, though they do not necessarily determine whether specific actions are taken. For this reason, the connections between steps 4–5, 5–6, and 6–7 are represented with dashed arrows. When actions are implemented, they may subsequently modify the cruise ship environment, service activities, and routines, thereby shaping future opportunities for C2C interaction.

Figure 1: Employee-informed managerial framework for C2C interactions on cruise ships



- (1) The cruise ship environment provides specific service activities and routines within a confined space
- (2) These activities and routines create opportunities for C2C interaction, to which passengers respond differently according to their motivations, affinities, travel configuration, and privacy expectations.
- (3) Depending on their voluntariness, emotional tone, and alignment with passenger expectations, these interactions may result in value co-creation or value co-destruction.
- (4) Frontline cruise employees observe interaction patterns and their experiential outcomes across different spaces and activities.
- (5) When relevant, employees may communicate their observations and operational knowledge to managers.
- (6) If this feedback is received and considered, it may inform tactical and strategic decision-making concerning spatial configurations, activity programming, service routines, and staff training.
- (7) If managerial decisions are adopted and implemented, they may be translated into employee training and facilitation practices that support voluntary C2C interaction and reduce the risk of value co-destruction.

Implemented measures may subsequently modify the cruise ship environment, service activities, and routines, thereby shaping future opportunities for C2C interaction.

Finally, Table 4 translates this process logic into specific design levers by linking spaces and triggers with enablers, barriers, risks, and possible interventions.

Table 4: Main Spaces/Triggers, Enablers/Barriers, Risks, and Suggested Interventions for C2C interactions

Category	Details
Spaces and triggers	• Bar-Restaurant: shared meals and leisure time (evening social activities and drinks) • Entertainment venues (shows, disco, pool...): shared enjoyment • Shore Excursions: shared interests • Gym and Spa: shared routines and interests • Common areas
Enablers/ Barriers	• The “enclosed” nature of the vessel fosters unavoidable encounters • Company philosophy: management mandates that social facilitation is part of the crew’s role • Itinerary logistics: multiple homeports within a single cruise make it harder to form stable ties • Cultural distance • Age mismatch • Desire for tranquillity, exclusivity, or privacy • Shyness
Risks	Value co-destruction resulting from: • Conflicts over resources in certain spaces (e.g., buffet queues, elevators) • Rudeness, excessive noise, discomfort • Misunderstanding, perceived intrusion
Interventions	• Staff training focused on: a) recognizing, supporting, and appropriately managing voluntary C2C interactions; b) developing mediation skills to prevent value co-destruction • Systematic application of homogeneity/affinity principles across spaces (shared language, nationality, culture, or age) • Restaurants (assigned dining): affinity and flexible seating, and staggered dining times • Entertainment: a) balanced programming with inclusive activity design and opt-in participation; b) segmented events tailored to specific groups (e.g., solo travelers, singles, LGBTQ+ groups) • Shore excursions: small-group design, clear communication, trained guides • Digital innovation: use of “interest tags” within onboard apps to foster organic social ecosystems • Improved onboard flow management • Clear behavioral norms and capacity control in selected spaces

CONCLUSIONS

In the tourism sector—particularly within the cruise industry—interactions among tourists play a crucial role in shaping the tourist experience and overall satisfaction (Heinonen et al., 2018). The objective of this research is to examine the perception of social relationships among cruise passengers, extending beyond mere courtesy, as viewed from the perspective of employees (excluding family relationships and travel companions). This perspective has received limited attention in the academic literature and thus serves to complement existing research, which has predominantly focused on the customer’s viewpoint. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach, consisting of 35 interviews with cruise employees conducted by the authors during the three cruises analyzed.

The methodology applied enables the presentation of a wide range of findings (some summarized in Tables 3 and 4). From an overall perspective, most cruise employees recognize the presence of C2C relationships beyond mere courtesy, some of which develop into friendships and ongoing relationships (Table 3). These C2C relationships contribute to customer satisfaction and enhance the overall experience, as also highlighted by previous studies (Huang & Hsu, 2009). These relationships have persisted over time despite the impact of COVID-19 and technological advances. Additionally, the findings support the notion that social relationships can mitigate the negative effects of passenger dissatisfaction arising from issues such as long queues, disagreements over cabin assignments, or specific services provided, as identified by Brejla & Gilbert (2014). However, not all passengers are interested in these C2C relationships, as such interactions depend on the companions they travel with and the primary objectives of the cruise. Another important finding concerns the spaces where C2C interactions occur. In fact, most C2C relationships take place in bar-restaurants, entertainment venues, and shore excursions, as also noted by Brejla & Gilbert (2014). Conversely, gymnasiums and spas are not particularly conducive to the development of C2C relationships beyond basic courtesy, although under certain conditions, such relationships may occur. The present study also identifies specific segments more likely to engage in social interactions beyond simple courtesy. These segments include young people, individuals, families, people who share a common language, those with shared interests, or individuals who connect at first sight, among others. This insight offers cruise lines the opportunity to more effectively target these segments. Finally, the study identifies specific strategies employed by cruise companies, particularly in relation to gastronomic spaces and shore excursions, aimed at satisfying particular passenger segments through tailored activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that C2C interactions are a context-dependent rather than universally positive component of the cruise experience. Viewed through the three perspectives identified in the literature review, these interactions may generate value co-creation or co-destruction (Heinonen et al., 2018; Malone et al., 2018; Adam, 2021), are shaped by perceived affinity among passengers (Wu, 2007; Song et al., 2018), and may be facilitated—but not controlled—by cruise companies (Rihova et al., 2018; Nguyen & Menezes, 2025). Accordingly, C2C interactions should be understood as voluntary relational processes shaped by spatial, organizational, and service-related conditions.

From a managerial perspective, this study offers valuable insights. These implications translate the study's conceptual lenses—servicescape, perceived affinity, value co-creation/co-destruction, and provider facilitation—into practical design levers for cruise companies. First, it underscores the importance of facilitating voluntary social interactions among passengers to enhance satisfaction, elevate the customer experience beyond that of a simple tourist cruise product (Di Vaio et al., 2022), and foster customer loyalty. In fact, C2C interactions can mitigate the negative effects arising from dissatisfaction due to other reasons. Second, it specifies some relevant spaces, triggers, enablers, barriers, risks, and interventions to develop C2C interactions efficiently (Table 4). More specifically, the study identifies particular physical spaces on board where social interactions beyond mere courtesy are more likely to occur, such as dining areas, entertainment venues, and shore excursion zones. This finding provides cruise lines with the opportunity to optimize these areas to foster passenger engagement. Effective space management is, therefore, a critical factor in enhancing customer satisfaction while simultaneously supporting revenue and profit optimization. In fact, the analysis of how the physical environment can affect customer experience and behavior—known as the “servicescape”—is growing in the tourism sector, including the cruise industry (Lyu et al., 2017; González-Santiago et al., 2025). From both spatial and scheduling perspectives, cruise companies can design and configure a set of variables that influence social interactions among passengers. Considering factors such as language, group composition, and shared interests, strategies for assigning shared tables can be developed based on affinity elements. Likewise, companies can design a catalog of activities for specific segments—such as solo travelers—that are structured yet non-intrusive, with the aim of reducing barriers to initial social contact. Shore excursions also merit special attention. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all passengers seek social interaction. Consequently, any strategy must respect passengers' interests and privacy to avoid value co-destruction. Additionally, several barriers may hinder social interaction, including itinerary logistics, demographic segmentation, and individual characteristics.

The incorporation of digital tools opens up new opportunities for stimulating C2C interactions. In this context, the integration of participation features within the onboard digital ecosystem is recommended, such as interest-based tags or activity recommendations tailored to small passenger groups. The creation of these micro-ecosystems can significantly foster organic, non-forced interactions among passengers. Likewise, digital spaces designed to remind passengers of upcoming events or activities may further support the development of interactions and strengthen existing social ties.

The outcomes of the proposed set of strategies could be assessed using interaction indicators such as the frequency, valence, depth, extent, and nature of C2C interactions. These indicators could then be linked to performance metrics, including the Net Promoter Score (NPS) and onboard spending, thereby facilitating future research avenues and managerial strategies that translate data into tangible performance outcomes.

To enhance the effectiveness of these measures, the role of employees—particularly frontline staff—becomes especially relevant, as they act as key transmitters of the cruise passenger experience. For this reason, it is important for cruise companies to provide targeted training to their employees, enabling them to gather valuable insights through observation and interaction with passengers. This information can then be communicated to management, supporting the development and implementation of more effective strategies that ultimately improve the customer experience and benefit cruise companies. At the same time, employees tend to be more motivated when their opinions are considered (Ariza-Montes et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2023). Moreover, it may be advantageous for a cruise line to differentiate itself by adopting a strategy that prioritizes the enhancement of social interactions, rather than relying solely on traditional factors such as itinerary, price, or ship features.

This study advances understanding of the operational and contextual conditions under which C2C/T2T/G2G interactions emerge in cruise tourism. Its contribution is not based solely on the limited attention previously given to the employee perspective, but on showing how employees reveal the spatial and operational conditions through which these interactions emerge, are facilitated, constrained, and sometimes managed. The article proposes an employee-informed managerial framework that places frontline employee observation at its core. Employees may act as “sensors,” capturing front-line information that often does not reach senior management, allowing operational reality to be compared with the customer's stated experience. Employee training should therefore include not only employee–guest interactions, but also the observation and appropriate management of guest-to-guest interactions. Research adopting a supply-side view in tourism remains scarce; however, it can be of great value for practitioners and managerial practice (Huang et al., 2023). Another relevant strength of this article is that the authors themselves conducted the interviews on board, which allowed them to better understand respondents' answers, adapt questions as needed, and more effectively address potential ambiguities in the study.

A key limitation of this study is its focus on a single company, MSC, one of the world's largest cruise lines, and on large ships carrying more than 3,000 passengers. This setting may shape the nature, frequency, and intensity of C2C interactions.

Accordingly, the findings are most transferable to large mass-market cruise contexts. C2C dynamics may differ in smaller ships, luxury cruises, adult-only cruises, or more privacy-oriented cruise products, where passenger density, service design, and expectations of exclusivity may differ substantially. Future research should expand this analysis to include other cruise companies and, specifically, develop an analysis by age, nationality, ship capacity, and some segments, such as adults-only and luxury travelers. Further studies should explore several avenues, including an in-depth analysis of the potentialities of space on cruise ships and a quantitative approach from the customer's perspective, incorporating additional relevant topics. Both types of analysis should consider factors such as the ship's capacity and quality, as these elements can facilitate the development of more efficient strategies that would benefit both cruise companies and their passengers. This study also opens up opportunities to broaden the analysis of the servicescape within the cruise industry.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

In preparing this paper, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language improvement and general assistance during the manuscript preparation and revision process. Following the use of this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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