

The role of parental safety perceptions for the future of family tourism

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Abstract

The quantitative research at hand analyses family tourism with categorical variables and descriptive statistics. Families traveling with children represent a huge share of the tourism market, still analyses that investigate their safety and security perceptions during their holidays are missing. Parents' security is a prerogative which is always at stake and might alter the reputation and demand for a destination. Results arising from a national Italian survey give evidence that mothers and fathers are more willing to select hospitality facilities with secure, family-friendly offers. Increased security measures and standards allow children to gain more freedom once at the location and the lodging eventually acquires parents' trustworthiness, increasing the quality of the stay.

Keywords: responsible tourism, family tourism, perception, security, customer behavior, tourism management

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1. Introduction

Family tourism is a rapidly evolving segment of the hospitality industry (Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015; Schänzel & Yeoman, 2014) as it represents 30 percent of the worldwide leisure travel market (Cicero & Osti, 2018). In the current experiential tourism economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2014), family trips have become “less about an escape or break from home routines and more about spending time with the family, doing fun activities that are different to normal and which create positive memories” (Schänzel, 2013 p.1). In this new context, family leisure involvement is directly related to the consolidation of memorable experiences as family holidays are currently considered a tool for adults and children’s well-being (Townsend et al., 2017; Zabriskie & Kay, 2013; Miyakawa & Oguchi, 2022; Durko & Petric, 2013), however security parameters are becoming key drivers for tourists’ decision-making and might alter the demand for a destination (Chauhan, 2007). Parents’ safety concerns range from crime rate to distance from family-friendly amenities, hygiene standards and efficacy of security personnel (Blancas et al., 2015, Matiza & Slabbert, 2021; Mott, 2020; Agarwal et al., 2010; Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2018).

While the aforementioned literature also ascertains the level of perceived children's safety at a given establishment directly influences parents' interest for that lodging, there are very few studies which examine families’ tourism preferences and little to null research on parents’ security needs at hospitality accommodations. As a matter of fact, only 131 publications have been focusing on family tourism and families’ tourism behaviour (Li et al., 2020) with respect to 1248 articles analysing customers’ experiences and tourists’ decisions (Kim & So, 2022). Since determining parents’ needs & wants for a tourism product purchase is said to play an exceptional role in the future of family tourism vacations (Niemczyk, 2015; Agarwal et al., 2010), this manuscript aims to bridge a gap in the academic world and accordingly investigate families’ decision-making criteria related to security standards and safety perceptions at tourism accommodations.

2. Area of study

Family tourism - Academia started talking about family tourism in 1978 (Li et al., 2020). Its socio-economic impact and its continuously rising importance (Zhang & Cao, 2022) have lately led the academic world to pay more attention to families’ tourism behavior (Wu et al., 2019), with a sharp but subdued rise of published studies registered in the last decade (Li et al., 2020). Family tourism manuscripts explain that the relationship between parents and children is what drives humanity and society (Schänzel & Yeoman, 2014) and, in this context, family trips have become a tool as well as a seed for enhancing the health of the traveling members (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001), increasing children’s cognitive skills (Miyakawa & Oguchi, 2022) and proliferating family happiness (Townsend et al., 2017; Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015). This relevant segment of the hospitality industry has recently encompassed many sub-clusters that are shaping the traditional concept of family holidays and are strengthening the socio-economic impact of the hospitality industry in Western as well as Eastern contexts (Wu et al., 2019). The definition of “family travel” currently includes many different individuals divided in several groups, such as married couples traveling together, spouses with children, grandparents with grandchildren, single parents with children, reunion-goers and siblings with relatives (U.S. Travel Association, n.d.). Similarly, Schänzel & Yeoman (2014, p.344) explain that the term “family holiday” has been molting and currently entails the presence of at least one adult and one child “that coexist within households and travel away from home for more than one day”.

Families in the experience economy - Family tourism results to be an established but blurred segment of the hospitality and travel industry (Kelly, 2020) that is enshrined in the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore 1998): the new tourism era that promotes uniqueness, authenticity and customer engagement (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2019) in which leisure time has become an active, multisensorial source of escapism from everyday life

(Kim & So, 2022). Along the two most recent decades, which are the epicenter of experiential tourism consumptions, children are becoming core actors in determining families' decisions (Poria & Timothy, 2014; Curtale, 2016; Feng & Li, 2016) and wish to experience encounters "which involve engagement with sight, smell, touch, and emotion" (Kelly, 2020, p.1). Comprehending children's vacational behaviors and preferences is described as a key managerial skill for the future of tourism since minors collect most of their childhood memories when on holidays (Durko & Petric, 2013). Studies show that the Generation Alpha, which is the current generation of under 13 children, efficiently undertakes physical as well as digital activities from a very young age given the availability of advanced and open-access technologies (Jha, 2020). As a consequence, parents are increasing their technological use in order to try to locate specific options that maximize the requests of the minors and, at the same time, alleviate safety concerns (Agarwal et al., 2010). Tourism operations online have become a normal routine (Prieto, 2021) and, when it comes to the decision-making phases, Khoo-Lattimore et al., (2018) prove that families particularly value the physical safety of accommodation spaces, the reliability and qualification of employees and high hygiene standards. Nevertheless, mothers and fathers prefer to have activities as close to the sojourning accommodation as possible (Thorton et al., 1997) and rank health, children's happiness and fun as main priorities during the stay (Tomić et al., 2019).

Safety & Security - According to Kővári & Zimányi (2010, p.2), the topic of tourists' safety has now more than ever turned into "an active element of tourism, an imperative to act in order to protect tourists and their belongings". Indeed, Moon et al. (2016)'s study reveals safety is an asset for customer satisfaction and Chauhan (2007)'s research defines the same term as part of the five forces that transform the market. Broadly speaking, literature defines as safe all the tourism destinations which have low to null criminal or terrorist attacks in their records (Kővári & Zimányi, 2010). Nevertheless, aesthetics and epidemic risk perceptions are considered relevant attributes as well since they can alter the safety perception of a place and directly harm or boost its tourism appeal (Moon et al., 2016; Kunjaraman 2021).

For what concerns specific tourism clusters, families appear to be amongst the most feared niche segments when it comes to planning and experiencing the holiday (Matiza & Slabbert, 2021). Notably, parents are constantly looking for spatial proximity between accommodations and family-friendly activities (Thorton et al., 1997). Security standards of mothers and fathers do not solely stop at the proximity between accommodations and entertainment spaces, but rather embed the qualification of employees and the presence of high hygiene standards (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2018). The increasing level of attention paid to the safety of minors is leading to an increase of parental stress before and during the holidays (Matiza & Slabbert, 2021), with plausible negative consequences on children's enjoyment of the vacation (Mott, 2020). In this context, Agarwal et al., (2010, p.36) conveys security will be a key topic for the future of family tourism as adults are striving to look for safe destinations on the web in order "to allay concerns".

Certificates as families' safety assurances - The experience economy and the pivotal role of authenticity, quality and uniqueness have so far enhanced business competitiveness and turned companies' attention into proving that their operations are above standards and up-to-date (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2012). Indeed, companies which currently display certificates that assess premium performances and superior quality with respect to rivals have so far obtained higher customer loyalty, higher customer purchasing value (Lee et al., 2018) and higher hotel earnings (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2012). Qualitative certificates are also shown to positively influence brand image and directly impact the value of the firm with flourishing tourism demand (Hays & Ozretić-Došen, 2014). Nicolau & Sellers (2010, p.837) further underline that companies are aware of the influence of certificates in the maximization of managerial operations and, for this reason, try to obtain as many awards as possible. In short, their disposal sets a qualitative boundary between the firm and competitors which "stands out in the market". For this reason, Esparon et al. (2013) urges firms to communicate certified practices and make them visible to the customer for maintaining a competitive advantage and retaining market share.

Tourism literature proves to abound with examples of qualitative and sustainable certificates in leisure accommodations, however there is not much to be said for security and safety labels. A report made by the Family

Travel Association highlights about 1 every 4 American families sees safety and health as a major challenge during holidays (Minnaert, 2020) and parents' perceived insecurity has increased during the pandemic as tourists have become more circumspect in their tourism consumption decisions (Matiza & Slabbert, 2021). Up until now, security and safety have been discussed by utilizing the themes of local sustainable tourism management (Hassan & Rahman, 2015 ; Cerqua, 2016 ; Gstaettner et al., 2019), public transport efficiency and crime prevention effectiveness (Blancas et al., 2015), thus keeping the focus on standards that target disparate travelers' segments within a defined but extended destination, consequently putting the attention apart from specific families' safety prerogatives within determined lodging establishments.

Briefly speaking, safety is becoming a crucial topic for parents' decision-making, however literature shows security inside hospitality facilities is still a blurred concept even though safe family-friendly businesses prove to be at the helm of parents' tourism choices. For the sake of enhancing family tourism experiences and expanding academic knowledge on this issue, the current publication will adopt multiple methods which will delineate parents' needs and eventually assess the role of safety standards for the future of the market.

3. Methodology

This manuscript investigates the safety and security perceptions of parents during their holidays. In this context, the researcher adopted descriptive statistics (Fisher & Marshall, 2009) in order "to summarize data in an organized manner by describing the relationship between variables in a sample or population" (Kaur et al., 2018, p.1). On this matter, a quantitative survey consisting of Italian families was used as a "sample population" (Allen, 2017). The choice of a national questionnaire lies in the fact that large-scale studies are considered fundamental for observing data and making predictions (Allen, 2017) and lead findings to become objective representations of the results obtained from the cluster targeted (Queirós et al., 2017). To increase the quality of quantitative results, the researcher used a technique adopted by Plonsky & Gass (2011), who make use of cumulative and historical perspectives of previous quantitative evaluations and research practices. In detail, even though this publication includes the first sample to solely focus on specific parental security preferences at hospitality facilities, the study strongly relies on previous reports and publications which directly or indirectly show results pertaining to the same topic. Broadly speaking, primary quantitative data constitute the core part of the text, meanwhile related quantitative studies were chosen because of their ability to detect clear findings which, in turn, are said to favor the comparison of results (Takata & Hallmann, 2021).

Sample Population - This study entails the participation of 241 Italian families and consists of a national survey with multiple choice questions related to vacation type, hospitality category and safety perceptions as well as hypothetical risks children would incur at the destination. The participatory audience was set to be 200, however the research will make use of all the 241 responses as a more consistent number of participants increases the evaluative validity of large samples (Statistics Solutions, 2022). Mothers and fathers who completed the survey accessed the questionnaire thanks to posts spread across multiple family-related Facebook groups. Demographic data show us 205 mothers, 30 fathers and 6 unspecified genre individuals completed the survey. Three quarters of attendees were between 36 and 50 years old, meanwhile around 10% account for the 51-60 and 18-35 ranges each. Almost half of the contributors represent a 4-member family, meanwhile one third of respondents declares to be part of a family of 3 individuals. The remaining groups are constituted by monoparental families and large families with 5 or more individuals.

Design of Questionnaire - Not including the part related to demographic data, the questionnaire was created with a total of 17 multiple choice questions related to the preferred vacation and the security perceptions of parents at the hospitality facility they are willing to select. The completion of the questionnaire took approximately two minutes. The first set of questions was mainly related to tourists' holiday preferences, meanwhile the second block introduced the topic of security and safety with the aim of grasping ideas about what hospitality brands can do to strengthen their family-friendly offer. The final part includes specific contexts in which children make recreational actions in different areas of the establishment with two different levels of enforced security. The selected areas

include the playground, the aquatic zone and the indoor common spaces. The two scenarios include:

- Firstly, a general context where parents are asked at what age they would let their children play alone in the area without any specified level of security
- Secondly, a detailed context in which parents are asked at what age they would let their children alone in the same areas, but with a strengthened security level (i.e. increased security personnel and monitors)

The age ranges rely on the “Child Development” explanation edited by the established Center for Disease, Control and Prevention (hereafter CDC). The youngest age group is composed of the “Preschoolers”: children from 3 to 5 years old who need to be checked “at all times, especially when playing outside”, followed by “Middle Childhood” groups (6 to 8 and 9 to 11 years old) and “Young Teens” above the age of 12. The older the children, the more freedom and complex tasks they receive (CDC, 2022). Overall, by dividing the questionnaire this way and with these age ranges, it was possible to understand where families want to go and which prerogatives are core for a safe and comfortable vacation. In short, the questionnaire was designed to get an overview of the current needs and wants of the cluster targeted in order to eventually create specific strategies that are able to generate high-quality, tailor-made services.

3.1 Limitations

Family tourism is a rising but still marginal topic in the academic discourse (Li et al., 2020) and the following results are the first of its kind. Krupnikov and Levine (2014) say that new studies with novel sample findings can be considered experiments with internally-valid conclusions, on the other hand the same research might entail a lack of cross-sample external validity. “External validity captures the extent to which inferences drawn from a given study's sample apply to a broader population or other target populations” (Findley et al., 2021, p. 365). Even though the sample of this manuscript is wide and involves 241 participants, who account for more than 700 traveling individuals, the absence of direct related studies targeting the same sample population does not allow the author to make major comparisons with other families’ behaviours from other countries. This eventually ascertains that findings and results can be classified as low on external validity.

4. Results

Participants are frequent travellers as 94% used to go on holiday at least once a year before the pandemic and only 3% declared not to be willing to take a vacation for this current year. The vast majority of the sample population will opt for a long stay, meanwhile one fifth of the sample will opt for a 4-to-6 night stay. The preferred locations are coastal areas and 75% of the sample has either been to the place in the past or has conveyed the destination was on the family’s wish list. Such data confirm Agarwal et al., (2010)’s claim that parents carefully gather information for their holidays and choose destinations which are satisfactory and secure in terms of offers and experiences (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2019). Indeed, family happiness is a factor that Townsend et al., (2017) and Schänzel and Yeoman, (2015) already mentioned as a key asset for family-friendly trips.

4.1 Family-friendly destinations

Literature suggests that, in the current experiential tourism economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2014), children are core protagonists of the stay and wish to explore and make memorable activities in the selected destination (Kelly, 2020; Schänzel, 2013). Family-friendly experiences are told to have the power to enhance parental relationships (Zabriskie & Kay, 2013; Miyakawa & Oguchi, 2022; Durko & Petric, 2013) and are ranked by families as a top priority for their children’s wellbeing (Tomić et al., 2019). The Italian families analyzed appear to confirm literature statements: two thirds of participants are looking for a destination which has a selection of family-friendly activities meanwhile one fourth of the sample appreciates direct contact with nature. Nevertheless, Matiza & Slabbert (2021) state safety is becoming an increasingly crucial topic. On this matter, questionnaire results demonstrate 112 families prove to be intrigued by areas which can grant comfort and security.

4.2 Parental security fears at hospitality accommodations

When it comes to selecting the type of accommodation, hotels (65%) and apartments (28%) are the two most favourite categories. Academic publications convey the key parental preferences for their holiday selection are related to the presence of entertainment facilities close to the sojourning location and include hygiene standards and qualified security or entertainment personnel (Agarwal et al., 2010; Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2018; Thorton et al., 1997). Also in this case, the table arising from the survey shows participants are in line with previous academic records. Around two thirds of parents show their commitment to select lodging offers which ensure a family-friendly environment and offer entertainment spaces like playgrounds and swimming pools. More than 40% of families believe the tourism facility needs to prioritize hygiene and security standards.

Table 1

Parent's preferences for a perfect holiday

Parents' needs for a perfect holiday	Support (%)
Family-friendly environment	64.3%
Qualified security and entertainment personnel	34%
High hygiene and safety standards	41.5%
Big outdoor and indoor spaces	32.8%
Flexible rooms or availability for special request	30.3%
Disposal of swimming pool ,playground or entertainment facilities	61%
Others	2.5%

Even though the vast majority of families want to have entertainment spaces inside the lodging option they select, table 2 exhibits swimming pools and aquatic amenities such as water slides are the most feared parts of an accommodation. Overall, data indicate that the perception of insecurity inside hospitality accommodations drops when the area is a common or private space which is not directly related to any kind of aquatic component; the second worrying area, terraces and gardens, accounts for less than one fourth of the responses.

Table 2

Parents' most feared areas of the hospitality facility

Most critical areas	Support (%)
Rooms (including the bathroom)	6.6%
Gardens and terraces	23.2%
Internal and dining spaces	15.8%
Swimming pool and aquatic amenities (water slides and aquatic games)	69.3%
Kid's club	8.3%
Sport facilities	7.1%
Nothing	3.7%
Beach areas	0.8%
Others	1.7%

4.3 Methods to increase perceived security

To further investigate how the establishment can guarantee a safer and more comfortable family-friendly experience, the questionnaire provided several ideas to the participants, some of which were largely supported. Respondents give credit to Khoo-Lattimore et al. (2018)'s findings that the presence of skilled employees is fundamental to allay concerns, with half of participants declaring increasing qualified personnel diminishes their safety and security fears. Similarly, parents widely support direct visual control of their children (50,6%). Although academia puts emphasis on the significance of certificates for a competitive position of hospitality firms (Lee et al., 2018; Alonso-Almeida et al., 2012; Hays & Ozretić-Došen, 2014), only a quarter of the sample population feels at ease if the tourism accommodation disposes of security labels. This data was below expectations based on the academic relevance attributed to the topic. The degree of support is even lower than the disposal of electronic devices which can show the exact position of the minor in the establishment. Overall, data clearly suggest that the hospitality facilities which apply specific concrete actions to tackle safety and security fears gain parents'

trustworthiness on a much higher scale than the mere disposal of certificates given by third parties.

Table 3

Strategies to tackle parental insecurity

Strategy	Support (%)
Disposing of security certificates which grant high safety standards	24.9%
Offering parents direct visual control areas to monitor their children	50.6%
Increasing the amount of qualified security and entertainment personnel	51.4%
Using widespread cameras across the crucial areas of the lodging	16.6%
Offer electronic bracelets or technological devices to locate children	27.8%
Others	3.2%

Another indicator of the importance of physical security actions inside tourism establishments comes from a yes-or-no question, where more than 65% of Italian mothers and fathers expressed their willingness to pay a higher price in exchange for premium additional security measures at the given accommodation.

4.4 Reinforced security, more freedom for children

Given the clear importance of tourists' behaviour (Wu et al., 2019), the author's aim was to further investigate the actual potential of concretely applying the practical safety strategies proposed in table 3. To gain valid results that are in accordance or contrast with the data collected, the ending part of the questionnaire included a series of hypotheses in which children play at specific areas of the establishment with two scenarios of higher or lower security level. Participants had to choose at which age they would let their children play alone, far from them. In detail, such hypotheses contain examples in which children move and do recreational activities in the swimming pool and internal areas of the establishment.

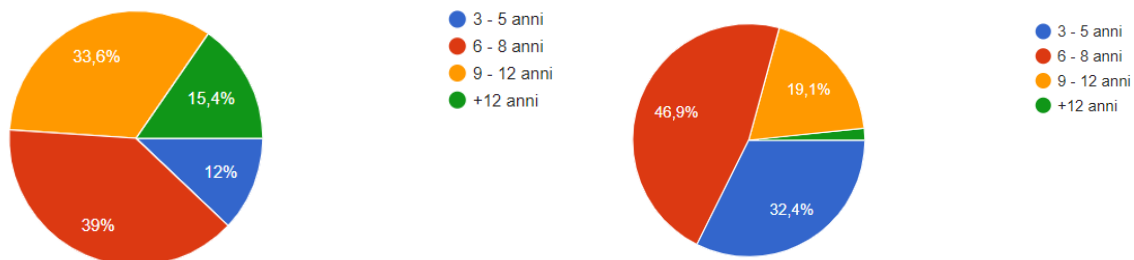


Figure 1. Normal and “increased security” scenario in the internal areas of the facility

In the first case, parents were asked at what age they would be willing to let their children move alone around the internal areas of the facility. The left pie chart represents the normal situation, where no major security measures are enforced, meanwhile the right graph presents a situation in which the hospitality company offers security checks and monitors all over the common areas. The graphs show a considerable difference, with the minimum age required for the freedom of movement dropping if the establishment provides its customers with increased security checks in the indoor sections of the facility. For example, 50% of respondents would not allow their children to move alone in indoor areas before 9 years old under standard conditions. This preference drops to 20% if the hospitality facility guarantees checking and monitoring.

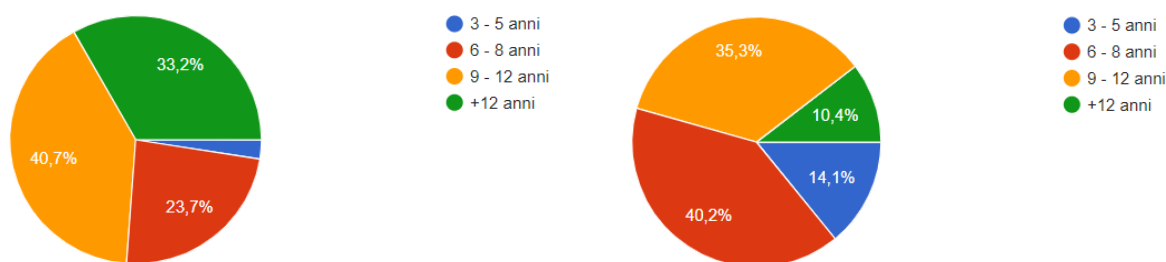


Figure 2. Normal and “increased security” scenario in the aquatic amenities of the facility

If table 2 shows 61% of family tourists wish to have a swimming pool in their lodging, almost 70% feel it is unsafe. This area of the establishment, subject of the second scenario, reveals a similar trend compared to the previous hypothesis depicted in Figure 1. Parents had to answer at what age they would let their children play alone in the water without their close control. Based on the level of stress arising from table 2, it is not a surprise that around 34% of respondents are considering giving such freedom only once their children have almost become teenagers. Under the presence of a qualified rescue and vigilance team in that same area, the parents who are willing to supervise their children until early adolescence drastically diminish to 10% in favor of lower categories of age.

4.5 Theoretical implications

As Moon et al., (2016), Chauhan (2007) and Agarwal et al., (2010) stressed, the topic of safety and security in the hospitality industry is very significant for the future of the market. The report supports Niemczyk (2015)'s idea that determining parents' needs & wants plays a core role in the future of family tourism vacations. Responses reveal material actions have a wider support compared to the disposal of qualitative certificates and the manuscript gives proof that parents' security and safety perceptions are able to diminish their worries and increase the demand for that place. Actually, extended supervision, the presence of zones where parents can have eye-contact with their children and the disposal of technological devices inside hospitality lodging are largely supported methods to tackle unsafe perceptions and instill trustworthiness in the minds of parents, who are consequently willing to give more freedom to their children during their holidays.

4.6 Managerial implications

Most of the families are planning to spend their stay at a hotel and, even though the majority of the sample population wishes to have a swimming pool in the lodging, the security at the aquatic amenities that the establishments offer are customers' biggest fear. Since family tourism represents 30 percent of the worldwide leisure travel market (Cicero & Osti, 2018) and the economic contribution of this segment to the hospitality industry is growing steeply (Zhang & Cao, 2022), data suggest hotel managers need to pay particular attention to the management of their aquatic services. Nevertheless, the researcher adds that hospitality brands should not underestimate the marketing and promotion of the aforementioned services since parents are increasing their technological use for finding the right accommodations (Agarwal et al., 2010) and advertising qualitative services plays a key role for gaining competitive advantage and achieving customer retention (Esparon et al., 2013).

5. Conclusion

In short, the survey clarifies the crucial role of safety and assesses a lower than expected parental support for certificates in favour of practical strategies enacted at the lodging. In other words, certificates and labels benefit from more academic interest, however their importance appears to be less relevant with respect to material actions that customers notice once they consume their stay.

The author eventually concludes by calling for further studies about this segment of the market with a particular focus on families' needs and wants connected to the travel & hospitality industry. Family tourism is an important but forsaken topic (Li et al., 2020) which needs more consideration. The majority of participants appear to be in favour of paying a higher price in exchange for higher security parameters and the questionnaire gave clear ideas about management strategies companies can follow to satisfy this relevant cluster of the market. By using willingness to pay as a dependent variable and by exploiting the same questions in other geographical and cultural contexts, the findings from the new surveys will increase external validity, showing proof of similar or completely different parental prerogatives that will allow researchers to better comprehend cultural disparities or convergencies in families' behaviours and managers to eventually generate in depth tailor-made strategies, for the wellbeing of every stakeholder.

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