Co-producing services to enhance cultural heritage.
The role of co-production in improving the quality of tourism services

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Abstract

Objectives. *This paper is aimed at discussing the role played by co-production in enhancing the value of cultural heritage and improving the quality of tourism services offered in highly visited tourist destinations.*

Methods. *The article critically depicts the findings of an exploratory case-study, which concerned one of the most visited tourist destination in the Southern of Italy: the Royal Palace of Caserta. Drawing from the theoretical framework suggested by Bovaird (2007), the Authors arranged a matrix to discuss the engagement of community members and tourists as co-producers of services. Several insights about the reliability of this conceptual matrix to explore the effects of service coproduction dealing with cultural heritage protection and promotion are discussed.*

Findings. *Patterns of service co-production to enhance cultural heritage are presented. Moreover, the limitations of current approaches to co-production are argued with the purpose of fostering further theoretical and empirical developments.*

Limitations. *The qualitative approach used for the purpose of this study did not allow to generalize the findings of the research; as well, the adoption of a cross-sectional perspective influenced the consistency of this study.*

Implications. *This paper provides some food for thought to both scholars and practitioners. On the one hand, it advances the research in the field of service co-production, applying this concept in an innovative way to tourism management. On the other hand, it points out the role of co-production in enhancing the quality of tourism services.*

Originality of the study. *Service co-production and value co-creation are two buzzwords in the field of tourism management. However, user engagement in improving the cultural heritage is still poorly acknowledged by both the scientific and professional literatures.*

Key words: *Co-production; Co-creation; Cultural heritage; User engagement; Tourism management*

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1. Introduction: the rise of the co-production idea

The idea of service co-production was formerly introduced by Ostrom and Ostrom (1978), who argued that, when the engagement of users as co-producers is lacking, services in themselves deteriorate in indifferent products, to which poor value is attached. In fact, the concept of co-production suggests that the services are the results of the joint "*productive efforts of regular and consumer producers*" (Parks, *et al.*, 1981, p. 1002), who mix their expertise, competencies, and skills to achieve enhanced ability of value creation. This interpretation is consistent with the conceptual framework proposed by Normann (1984), who suggested that users play a dual role in the provision of services. On the one hand, they are used to perform as customers, who eventually benefit from the activities realized by regular providers. On the other hand, they operate as key parts of the service delivery system, whose contribution is crucial to the value creation process. In the light of this point of view, providers should not behave as mere relievers in delivering services, with the eventual aim of individually satisfying the needs of customers. Rather, they are called to perform as enablers, empowering users to actively participate in the process of service provision.

Claiming that co-production is crucial to service provision, Whitaker (1980) distinguished two different categories of services, taking into consideration the intensity of involvement of both direct and indirect users. Hard services (such as security, safety services, and water provision) are characterized by a low involvement of the users, whose contribution in value creation is assumed to be poorly significant. Alternatively, soft services (including education and health care, as well as tourism) require a strong participation of the users. In fact, soft services are aimed at producing a sort of transformation in social and/or behavioral attributes of the recipients. Therefore, even though co-producing behaviors could be retrieved with regards to both hard and soft services, the overlap of the providers and users' spheres is especially significant dealing with latter (Sharp, 1980).

In any case, co-production of services implies a revisited relationship between the providers and the users. They are eventually engaged in a co-creating partnership, according to which both of them concur in the generation of value. Indeed, co-production is usually assumed to pave the way for enhanced outcomes and increased effectiveness (Percy, 1983), thus turning out to be desirable to both providers and users. Even though a lot of intrinsic rewards incite users to be involved in the provision of services (Alford, 2002), Parks and Colleagues (1981) have emphasized that co-production is not easy to realize, since it requires technical feasibility, economic desirability, and favourable institutional arrangements to be implemented. Moreover, several barriers hinder the implementation of co-production (Bovaird and Loffler, 2012), including: the difficulties in producing evidences about the positive effects of co-production; the lack of professional skills to foster users involvement; the reluctance of providers to lose control on service provision; the lack of capacity, motivation, and self-confidence of the users; and the users' aversion to risk and propensity to delegate service provision to regular providers.

In the light of these considerations, it could be assumed that co-production goes well beyond the concepts of users involvement and engagement. Actually, it implies an "*equal partnership*" between service providers and users (Boyle and Harris, 2009, p. 12), according to which both of them perform as expert partners, who strongly contribute in the process of service provision. Adhering to this interpretation, a lot of scholars coming from very different disciplines have widely discussed the attributes and the characteristics of co-production, concurring to the advancement of the knowledge about this particular issue (see, among the others: Brandsen, *et al.*, 2014; Osborne and Strokosch, 2013; Parry, *et al.*, 2012; Chen, *et al.*, 2011; Cheung and To, 2011; Ordanini and Pasini, 2008; Wilson, 1992).

Drawing from the findings of the cited literature, a comprehensive definition of service co-production could be finally arranged. First of all, the idea of co-production maintains that the inputs aimed at service provision are not exclusively supplied by providing organizations. Actually, both direct and indirect users are deeply involved in the process of service provision, playing a tangible role in co-creating value. Hence, the definition worked out by Ostrom (1996, p. 1073) is especially useful to define service co-production: it is "*the process through which inputs used to produce a*

good or service are contributed by individuals who are not 'in' the same organization". Therefore, the co-production approach involves: 1) the acknowledgement of people as crucial assets of the society; 2) the redefinition of work between regular providers and users in a perspective of enhanced reciprocity; and 3) the improvement of social networks to boost mutual trust between users and providers (Boyle, *et al.*, 2010). In sum, co-production emphasizes the importance of reciprocity and shared commitment between users and providers to achieve enhanced capacity of value creation (Cepiku & Giordano, 2014).

Complying with this interpretation, Brudney and England (1983) identified three different types of service co-production according to the breadth and depth of users' engagement. Collective co-production (Ewert & Evers, 2012) is the broader approach of users' involvement in the provision of services. It revisits the traditional relationship between the providers and the target population, engaging the latter in planning, designing and delivering services with the eventual purpose of making them more compliant with the evolving needs of the community. Group co-production is more limited as compared with collective co-production. In fact, it implies the joint involvement as active service co-producers of homogeneous groups of users, who share common needs and/or similar interests (Roberts, *et al.*, 2012). Their purpose is to expand the range of public services, complementing or substituting the activities traditionally performed by the providing organizations. Lastly, individual co-production concerns the direct or indirect collaborative relationship between the single user and one or more providers. It challenges the traditional conceptualization of services as provider-led products; alternatively, it acknowledges that the users are not mere consumers of value, but key actors in the activities of service design and delivery. In these words, the users are called to establish a co-creating partnership with the providers, collaborating with them to achieve value creation.

Drawing from these considerations, the paper is aimed at applying the idea of co-production to cultural heritage and tourism services, concurring to fill a significant void in the scientific literature. In fact - as it will be argued in the following section - even though the concern about value co-creation is rapidly growing among both scholars and practitioners, the co-production of tourism services' has been poorly discussed by the professional and the academic literatures in the field of tourism management. Therefore, this article has a twofold relevance. On the one hand, it contributes to the advancement of the knowledge in the field of service co-production, adapting this concept to cultural heritage and tourism services, in the light of an innovative perspective. On the other hand, it provides some food for thought to practitioners, discussing interesting evidences about the effects of service co-production dealing with cultural heritage and tourism services.

The manuscript is organized as follows. The next section contextualizes the co-production concept to cultural heritage and tourism services, highlighting the current gap in the scientific literature. In addition, the theoretical framework employed for the purpose of this research is depicted. Then, the research methodology which inspired this study is described into details; in particular, a case study approach was adopted, which turned out to be consistent with the prevailing exploratory nature of this research. The fourth paragraph shows the findings of this study and points out the contribution of co-production to the enhancement of cultural heritage and to the improvement of tourism services' quality. The fifth section critically discusses the findings of the research, thus paving the way for both theoretical and practical implications, which are illustrated in the concluding section of the article.

2. Co-production and cultural heritage: a gap in the scientific literature

The distinguishing shades assumed by service co-production in the fields of tourism services and cultural heritage have been poorly examined by the scientific literature. Indeed, mainly drawing from the propositions worked out by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and by Vargo and Lusch (2004), most of the scholars have focused their attention on the more generic concept of value co-creation, which has been barely described in terms of users' active involvement in the consumption

experience. From this point of view, the idea of co-creation of the tourism experience has been the primary object of analysis for the scholarship interested in revisiting the conceptualization of the relationships between the users and the providers in a perspective of a more active and engaged role of the former (Baron and Harris, 2008).

Actually, one of the most popular issues among scholars and practitioners concerned with the co-production of tourism services and the co-creation of value has been the application of the service-dominant (S-D) logic to tourism management (Shaw, *et al.*, 2011). Through this lens of analysis, the involvement of users has been alternatively described as a crucial approach: to enhance tourism industry competitiveness (Eraqi, 2011); to improve the development of user-centered services (Talsma and Molenbroek, 2012); to increase customer satisfaction and long-term loyalty (Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012); to achieve strong and sustainable competitive advantages (Blazquez-Resino, *et al.*, 2013); and to encourage new service development processes (Ngamsirijit, 2014).

In line with these findings, the importance of individual tourist resources for a better understanding of the complex process of value creation of tourism services has been widely emphasized (Prebensen, *et al.*, 2013). In fact, several Authors have claimed that the engagement of the users in the process of service provision should be contemplated within the policies of the different types of operators which are part of the tourism industry (Cabiddu, *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, co-creation is conceived as an interactive and circular process, which affect the activities of all the entities involved in the design and the delivery of tourism services (Sfandla and Björk, 2013). Besides, in several studies users have been found to co-create value not solely with providing organizations, but also with other users, echoing the worth of tourism experiences through social practices and inter-personal relations (Rihova, *et al.*, 2014), either in a direct or in an indirect way (Pera, 2014).

Even though several scholars maintain that value co-creation and service co-production could be interchangeably used (Voorberg, *et al.*, 2014), these two concepts do not completely match each other. In particular, value co-creation mainly affects the individual consumption experience of the user. Alternatively, the idea of co-production is more extensive, since it involves the engagement of both direct users (that is to say tourists) and indirect users (*e.g.* community members and volunteers) as real service co-producers. As anticipated, such a perspective of service co-production in the fields of tourism and cultural heritage management has been widely overlooked. Therefore, the encouragement of the academic and professional debate about the role of co-production in enhancing cultural heritage and improving tourism services' quality could bring to interesting and original insights, which are currently neglected by both scholars and practitioners. With the eventual intention of applying the co-production concept to the appropriate management of cultural heritage, the theoretical framework devised by Bovaird (2007) with regards to professionalized public services has been adapted, in order to make it more consistent with the specific attributes of tourism services. Actually, this theoretical framework allowed to focus on the service nature of the tourism experience and to explore the approaches according to which the users and the providers cooperate to co-create value in terms of cultural heritage enhancement.

As shown in Table 1, Bovaird (2007) identified a diversified range of professional-user relationships, taking into consideration the way regular providers and users or community members perform the activities of services' planning, designing, and delivery. In particular, the columns of Table 1 show the distribution of responsibilities between the professionals and the users or the community members with regards to the planning and/or the design of services, while rows depict the allocation of functions related to the delivery of services.

Drawing from this theoretical framework, 8 different approaches of service co-production could be pointed out. When both service planning and service delivery are provider-led, a traditional approach to service provision prevails, which conceives users as mere consumers of value and does not require user involvement in service provision. Alternatively, users could be engaged in planning services, but not in delivering them: in this case, the traditional service provision is associated with the involvement of direct and indirect users in planning and designing

services, in order to make them more compliant with the perceived needs of the community. As well, users could be involved in delivering services, while planning activities continue to be controlled by regular providers: in these circumstances, users and community members co-deliver services which are professionally designed, in order to complement the efforts of providing organizations and to improve their sustainability.

Users could be also engaged as the sole providers of professionally designed services, thus performing as the main value creators in service provision, even though they are not engaged in devising the attributes and the characteristics of this process. Besides, the activity of direct and indirect users as sole deliverers of services could concern products which are co-planned by regular providers and users. Last but not least, users could perform as co-deliverers of services which are planned without the contribution of regular providers. Obviously, full co-production is realized only when both regular providers and users are simultaneously engaged in both planning, designing, and delivering services.

Tab. 1: Range of Professional-User/Community Relationships

Delivery approach / Plan and design approach	Professionals as sole service planner	Professionals and users/community as co-planners	Users/community as sole service planner
Professionals as sole service deliverer	Traditional service provision	Traditional service provision with users/community involvement in planning and designing services	N/A
Professionals and users/community as co-deliverer	Users/community co-delivery of professionally planned and designed services	Full Co-Production approach	Users/community co-delivery of self-devised services
Users/community as sole service deliverer	Users/community sole delivery of professionally planned and designed services	Users/community sole delivery of co-planned and co-designed services	Self-organized users/community provision

Source: Authors' re-elaboration from Bovaird (2007)

Adjusting the original model proposed by Bovaird (2007), the Authors arranged a theoretical framework (shown in Table 2) which is aimed at applying the co-production concept to the enhancement of cultural heritage and to the improvement of tourism services' quality. Going more into details, it is assumed that both direct and indirect users - that is to say both tourists and other relevant stakeholders, including community members, non-profit organizations, and voluntary associations - could be involved in service provision, thus participating in the process of value creation.

According to this revisited theoretical framework, regular providers could maintain their role of sole service planner with regards to the promotion of cultural heritage and the design of related tourism services (first column of Table 2). In this case, the traditional service provision entails the sole management of service delivery by the providing organizations, which control the entire process of value creation. Regular providers could also decide to engage direct and indirect users in co-delivering services in partnership with regular providers, with the purpose of complementing the services provided. As well, users could be entitled to perform as sole deliverers, being entrusted to realize the activities planned and designed by the providers.

Alternatively, regular providers could involve users and community members in planning and designing innovative services, with the eventual purpose of achieving an enhanced ability to meet the evolving needs of external stakeholders (second column of Table 2). In these circumstances, the delivery of services could be exclusively ascribed to regular providers or it could be assigned to the users or community members who have been formerly engaged in co-planning and co-designing services. Also in this case full co-production is achieved when both regular providers and users or community members are deeply involved in both planning, designing and delivering services, thus thoroughly concurring in the enhancement of cultural heritage and in the improvement of tourism services' quality.

Lastly, service planning and design could be handled by users and members of the community (third column of Table 2). In this case, regular providers are fully receptive to new ideas and insights which came from non-ordinary perspectives, paving the way for enhanced service innovation. The delivery of services which are conceived by users and community members could be performed by regular providers, which thus strive to maintain a significant control of the process of value creation. Alternatively, the process of provision could be managed by users and community members themselves, without any involvement of service providers. Also services planned and designed by direct or indirect users could be co-delivered through a co-creating partnership by both regular providers and users.

The conceptual scheme depicted in Table 2 will be employed in presenting the findings of this research as well as in discussing the attributes and the effects of initiatives of co-production in the fields of cultural heritage management and tourism management. Indeed, it will allow to draw several exploratory insights about the current state of the art in the co-production of tourism services and the co-creation of cultural heritage, thus paving the way for further conceptual and empirical developments.

Tab. 2: Range of Regular Providers-User/Community Relationships

Delivery approach / Plan and design approach	Providing organization as sole service planner	Providing organization and users/community as co-planners	Users/community as sole service planner
Providing organization as sole service deliverer	Traditional service provision	Traditional service provision with users/community involvement in planning and designing services	Traditional service provision, where services are inspired by users and/or community
Providing organization and users/community as co-deliverer	Users/community co-delivery of services which are planned and designed by regular providers	Full Co-Production approach	Users/community co-delivery of self-devised services
Users/community as sole service deliverer	Users/community sole delivery of services which are planned and designed by regular providers	Users/community sole delivery of co-planned and co-designed services	Self-organized users/community provision

Source: Authors' re-elaboration from Bovaird (2007)

3. Methods

In the light of the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted. In particular, the Authors decided to pay their attention to a single case study, which allowed to collect first-hand and relevant evidences about the key topic of this study, that is to say the adaptation of the co-production approach to the promotion of cultural heritage and to the enhancement of tourism services' quality. As anticipated, the theoretical framework presented in the previous section inspired the utilization of the case study methodology. In fact, the observed reality was examined taking into consideration the different types of co-production which are portrayed in Table 2. From this point of view, the study allowed to check the reliability of the conceptual framework drawn from Bovaird (2007), pointing out specific experiences of co-production in line with the type of relationship established between the users and the providers.

Different arguments justified the utilization of the single case study methodology. First of all, this methodological approach met the researchers' need to achieve broad generalizations, which were based on the qualitative findings collected through the empirical analysis (Yin, 2003). Actually, the single case study method could be understood as one of the most fitting research methods to deal with the complexity of organizational and social phenomena (Yin, 1999), including the issues contemplated by this study. Like other qualitative approaches, the case study method is especially useful when "how" or "why" questions are handled; moreover, it is appropriate when the examined reality could be understood as a contemporary phenomenon, taking place within some real-life context (Yin, 2003). Last but not least, the case study methodology allowed the collection

of both quantitative and qualitative data, which paved the way for a rich understanding of the topic of interest (Tellis, 1997). All relevant data were drawn from the close examination of people and issues affected by the subject of the research, thus providing a full-fledged representation of the reality examined (Hays, 2004). In fact, the single case study method allowed a *tout court* examination of the issue of interest, that was conceived as a single subject of analysis, around which specific boundaries were set to detach it from concurrent or convergent phenomena (Merriam, 1998).

Drawing from Yin (2003), the case study methodology could be subdivided in three main approaches of analysis, that is to say: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. While exploratory case studies serve as preliminary research directed at inspiring further developments, explanatory approaches are aimed at building and testing grounded conceptual models. Differently, descriptive approaches are intended at providing a homogeneous portrayal of the reality examined, with the eventual purpose of clarifying the ideas about the debated issues. To achieve the aims of this study, a mainly exploratory approach was adopted. Actually, it enabled to shade light on a topic which is still poor acknowledged by both scholars and practitioners, inciting further theoretical and practical developments.

In line with Yin (2003), the design of the research involved four main phases, that is to say: 1) the preparatory activities aimed at establishing the main conditions for data collection; 2) the collection of relevant data and information, according to the main issues taken into consideration; 3) the analysis of the data, in order to draw from them significant evidences; and 4) the arrangement of the case study report. Therefore, in the first phase of the research the Authors identified the subject of the case study and they selected the main sources which were contemplated in order to realize the process of data collection. The Royal Palace of Caserta was identified as the sole subject of the research. It is a former royal residence established in Caserta, a large municipality in the Southern of Italy, which was commissioned by Charles III Bourbon in 18th century. The building and the garden were planned by Luigi Vanvitelli, being conceived as a triumph of the Italian Baroque. The Royal Palace has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997, described as the "*swan song of the spectacular art of the Baroque, from which it adopted all the features needed to create the illusions of multidirectional space*"[1]. Besides, it is the largest royal residence in the world. Even though it shares the same attributes of most of 18th century royal establishments, "*it is exceptional for the broad sweep of its design, incorporating not only an imposing palace and park, but also much of the surrounding natural landscape and an ambitious new town laid out according to the urban planning precepts of its time*"[2].

The subject of the case study was randomly selected among the 10 most visited Italian destinations according to the statistics worked out by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities. In addition to the Royal Palace of Caserta, the list of the most visited Italian destinations included: the integrated archaeological circuit of Coliseum, Roman Forum, and Palatine Hill (Rome); the archaeological site of Pompeii (Naples); the Uffizi Gallery and Vasari Courtyard (Florence); the Accademia Gallery (Florence); the Castle of the Holy Angel - Mausoleum of Hadrian (Rome); the Boboli Gardens and Pitti Palace (Florence); the Royal Palace of Venaria (Turin); the Egyptian Museum (Turin); and the Borghese Gallery (Rome).

Complying with the indications of the prevailing literature (see, among the others: Dul & Hak, 2008 and Meyer, 2001), various sources and diversified techniques were utilized with the purpose of collecting relevant information about the subject of the case study. At the beginning of the field study, a document analysis concerning the main strategic and operational initiatives realized by the central administration of the Royal Palace of Caserta in the field of cultural heritage enhancement and tourism services' quality improvement was performed. The document analysis included: census data, strategic and operational plans, policy reports, information pamphlets, and operative projects. In addition, the institutional web site of the Royal Palace of Caserta was examined to obtain late information about the topic of interest. Last but not least, unstructured interviews involving several

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[1]   As stated in the World Heritage List No. 549rev, edited by the UNESCO about the Royal Palace of Caserta, at page 31.
[2]   As stated in the World Heritage List No. 549rev, edited by the UNESCO about the Royal Palace of Caserta, at page 34.

key informants were realized. In particular, key informants were conveniently selected among both the members of the staff of the Royal Palace of Caserta and the external stakeholder interested in co-production of tourism services and in the enhancement of cultural heritage. Unstructured interviews allowed the acquisition of first hand and rooted evidences, which turned out to be crucial for the purposes of this study. All the collected data were triangulated to check the reliability of the research method.

The evidences gathered as a result of the field study were logically organized within an electronic worksheet, according to a research protocol which was agreed by the Authors before the beginning of the process of data collection. In particular, data and evidences were categorized in homogeneous categories by topics and sources. The Authors critically analysed all the data and information retrieved. This examination was independently performed by the Authors. At a later stage, the Authors shared their considerations about the findings retrieved: any inconsistency was discussed in-depth, in order to settle disagreements and to achieve common understandings about the reality examined. The next section exhibits the main findings of the research, providing a careful description of the factors which pointed out the implementation of co-production initiatives by the Royal Palace of Caserta.

4. Findings: value co-production and cultural heritage enhancement

Neither the strategic nor the operational planning of the Royal Palace of Caserta included a perceivable concern for the involvement of external stakeholders in the co-provision of services and the realization of activities aimed at improving the value of cultural heritage and/or enhancing the quality of tourism services. However, the guidelines arranged by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities for programmatic management of the sites indexed in the Unesco World Heritage List[3] identifies the involvement of external stakeholders - including citizens and tourists - as crucial to the protection and the promotion of cultural heritage. Moreover, even though co-production was not contemplated among the strategic priorities of the Royal Palace of Caserta, its Service Charter[4] mentioned the involvement of users in both the decision making and the activities which concern the services provided to citizens and tourists among the managerial principles of the site.

Lacking a strong strategic and managerial commitment to the engagement of direct and indirect users for the purposes of cultural heritage enhancement and service quality improvement, co-production has been usually neglected by the employees of the Royal Palace of Caserta, both those operating at the managerial levels and those performing operational functions. Actually, during a face to face interview, a middle manager claimed that the site "*is unwilling to establish co-creating relationships with external partners, especially if they are not public sector entities*" [KI #5]. Similarly, a front-office worker in charge for public relations management revealed that " *the senior managers are usually unconfident of the involvement of users in the institutional activities of the site (...), because they are afraid that this could result in increased vulnerability for the authenticity of the cultural heritage*" [KI #3]. As well, the results of a focus group involving a team of employees appointed at the establishment and management of collaborations with external partners suggested that users' involvement is "*conceived as a threat, rather than as an opportunity*" [KI #6]. In fact, it is likely that "*partners are not interested in enhancing cultural heritage (...). Rather, most of them are concerned with the achievement of egoistic purposes, neglecting the real needs of the site*" [KI #1].

In spite of these prevailing considerations, several key informants were consistent in arguing that the current distrust in co-production is partially associated with the ambiguous managerial

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[3] The full text of the guidelines can be retrieved from: *www.unesco.beniculturali.it/getFile.php?id=44*. This web site has been last accessed on March, 26th 2015.

[4] The full text of the Service Charter edited by the Royal Palace of Caserta can be retrieved from: *reggiadicaserta.beniculturali.it/carta_qualità_2011.pdf*. This web site has been last accessed on March, 26th 2015.

autonomy of the administration of the Royal Palace of Caserta. As claimed by one of the senior managers interviewed, "*the strict supervision of the National Authority for the Protection of Cultural Heritage constrains the adoption of innovative approaches which are receptive to service co-production*" [KI #4]. On the other hand, the late administrative reform (DPCM no. 171/2014) which recognized special managerial autonomy to the senior management of the site is expected to act as a stimulus to the increased use of service co-production for the purpose of cultural heritage protection and promotion. In addition, "*the enhanced financial and managerial autonomy of the site will require new models of service provision to achieve sustainability (...) including the involvement of users in the provision of services*" [KI #7].

From this point of view, some initiatives aimed at encouraging the involvement of external partners in the implementation of ancillary activities of the Royal Palace of Caserta could be interpreted in the light of the intention to revisit the traditional self-reliant approach to the management of the site. Among the others, a call for sponsorship issued in 2014 to co-design and co-produce the uniforms of the employees of the Royal Palace of Caserta disclosed a rising openness to the contributions of the community to value creation. On the one hand, this call was aimed at "*activating the financial and intellectual assets of the community to improve the sustainability of the site*" [KI #5]; on the other hand, initiatives like this one concur in "*building a stronger and shared identity of the Royal Palace (...), making local entrepreneurs, citizens, and users in general more committed to the enhancement of the site*" [KI #2].

Despite the prevailing distrust of co-production perceived by the administration of the site, the community showed a strong concern for the promotion of the cultural heritage embodied by the Royal Palace of Caserta. In fact, a cultural association named "Amici della Reggia" ("Friends of the Royal Palace") has been recently established to encourage the involvement of the community in the activities directed at endorsing the cultural and historical values of the site. This association performed as the co-planner and the sole deliverer of several successful initiatives, including: 1) the requiem mass to celebrate the former architect of the Royal Palace, Luigi Vanvitelli; 2) the project "Tell me about your Royal Palace", addressed to pupils of primary and secondary schools to awake their awareness of the cultural heritage of the Royal Palace of Caserta; and 3) the project "A tale about the portrait of Maria Cristina Bourbon", to raise the consciousness about the history of the site.

In a similar way, the association "Lega Problemi Handicappati - LPH" (League for Handicapped Concerns) addressed most of its efforts to the Royal Palace of Caserta, with the purposes of improving the accessibility to the site of people living with either physical, psychic, or psycho-physic minorities and encouraging the contribution of the latter in the protection and promotion of the cultural heritage. In particular, establishing a partnership with public and non-profit entities which operate in the municipality of Caserta, LPH has performed as the sole planner and the co-deliverer of several services directed, on the one hand, at enhancing the quality of the services provided by the Royal Palace to individuals living with disabilities and, on the other hand, at advancing the communication about the cultural and historical assets of the site.

These associations also operate as catalysers for the engagement of individual members of the community to the promotion of cultural heritage and to the enhancement of tourism service quality. As an illustrative example, by virtue of the mediating activity performed by LHP a citizen of the municipality of Caserta has been identified as the sole deliverer of the restoration of a historical handcrafted reproduction in scale 1:200 of the Royal Palace of Caserta. This reproduction will be exhibited at the entrance of the site, to provide visitors with an overview of the complex architectural scheme of the Royal Palace. Moreover, it will be taken as a model to realize a reproduction in scale 1:50 of the site, in order to allow a tactile visit of the Royal Palace to blind tourists.

As anticipated, the management of the Royal Palace of Caserta expressed a greater openness to service co-production when dealing with associations or individuals maintaining a strong contact with the public sector. In fact, only in two circumstances the Royal Palace of Caserta performed as the sole planner of services which were delivered by external stakeholders. In particular, the

"Associazione Nazionale Carabinieri - ANC" (National Association of Carbineers) fulfilled several ancillary functions within the site, such as the surveillance and the safeguard of cultural heritage. As well, the local unit of the national "Civil Protection" collaborated in cleaning the assets of the site and preserving the habitat integrity of the animal species living in the garden of the Royal Palace.

Whatever their role in co-producing services, the entities which participated in the protection and the promotion of the cultural heritage of the site were consistent in claiming that "*the management is not prone to acknowledge the value-added provided by external stakeholders (...); as a consequence, little is done to encourage the engagement of the community*" [KI #8]. In most of the cases, the problems lied within "*the scepticism with which the administration looks at the proposal of co-production initiatives*" [KI #10]. Even though the current shortage of available resources is supposed to call for the activation of the energy of the community, "*a self-reliant and egocentric managerial approach is still prevailing*" [KI #9], which prevents both the success and the sustainability of initiatives aimed at co-creating value. Last but not least, the "*suspicious behavior of the managers toward the initiatives of co-production discourages the involvement of the community (...) and paves the way for the disengagement of both associations and individuals*" from the protection and promotion of cultural heritage [KI #11].

5. Discussion

The engagement of external stakeholders is crucial to enhance the value of cultural heritage, as well as to improve the quality of services delivered to tourists. Actually, the current shortage of available resources makes the contribution of the community imperative to achieve increased conditions of sustainability. In fact, both national and international guidelines in the field of cultural heritage management acknowledge the importance of service co-production for the purpose of value creation. However, the findings of this study suggest that the top management of historical and cultural sites are still unwilling to release the potential of co-production, showing a strong distrust of the involvement of external partners in the enhancement of cultural heritage. Even though inter-organizational relationships with public sector entities seem to be more accepted, they are generally used to perform ancillary services, including cleaning of open spaces and surveillance.

As a consequence, the senior management of the Royal Palace of Caserta is likely to neglect the opportunities paved by the engagement of the community in the co-production of services. Collaboration proposals are usually understood as an attempt of external stakeholders to exploit the cultural heritage of the site for the achievement of egoistic purposes, thus undermining the authenticity of its cultural and historical values. Therefore, the establishment of partnerships with external entities is handled with suspicion and scepticism, even when they are aimed at improving the access to the site and at enhancing the community awareness of the cultural heritage embodied by the site. From this point of view, the lack of initiatives aimed at engaging the direct and indirect users in the protection and the promotion of the Royal Palace of Caserta could be explained in the light of the poor confidence of managers in the positive effects produced by service co-production.

The weak managerial autonomy assigned to the administration of the Royal Palace of Caserta has further exacerbated such a mistrust of service co-production for the enhancement of cultural heritage. In fact, the deep supervision of the National Authority for the Protection of Cultural Heritage significantly constrains the freedom of choice of managers when they have to deal with the proposals of collaboration submitted by cultural and/or voluntary associations operating in the municipality of Caserta, as well as by individual citizens. However, the recent administrative reform aimed at expanding both the responsibility and the autonomy of the managers of the Royal Palace of Caserta paves the way for the rearrangement of the traditional managerial approaches to the protection and the promotion of cultural heritage, ascribing greater importance to both the engagement of the community and the co-production of services by direct and indirect users.

Table 3 synthetizes the findings of this study. The traditional model of service provision, where the administration of the Royal Palace performs as both the planner, the designer, and the deliverer

of services, is still prevailing. In line with this approach, the managers of the Royal Palace of Caserta have been found to be poorly receptive to community engagement and service co-production, looking with suspicion at the proposal of collaborations submitted by both associations and individual community members. Notwithstanding, weak signals of change could be perceived. On the one hand, several ancillary services, which are solely planned and designed by the administration of Royal Palace of Caserta, have been assigned in co-delivery to local units of national associations, such as the ANC with regards to security and surveillance services, and the Civil Protection with regards to cleaning activities. On the other hand, a call for sponsorship to design and produce the official uniforms of the employees of the Royal Palace of Caserta is the first example of engagement of the community in the delivery of ancillary services planned and controlled by the administration of the site.

In spite of the hostility of the administration of the Royal Palace toward the involvement of citizens and users in service provision, co-production turns out to be particularly effective for the achievement of two relevant purposes of the site. First of all, the engagement of the community is key to raise the awareness of the cultural heritage embodied by the Royal Palace. Indeed, the association "Amici della Reggia" operates as the deliverer of several co-planned services which are addressed to both tourists and members of the community to better communicate the cultural and historical values of the site and to build a shared identity around them. Moreover, LPH performs as the sole planner of several co-delivered services aimed at improving the access to the site of people living with disabilities and at increasing the ability of the site to communicate its cultural heritage to disadvantaged users.

Tab. 3: Range of Regular Providers-User/Community Relationships

Delivery approach / Plan and design approach	Providing organization as sole service planner	Providing organization and users/community as co-planners	Users/community as sole service planner
Providing organization as sole service deliverer	Traditional service provision		
Providing organization and users/community as co-deliverer	ANC; Civil Protection		LPH
Users/community as sole service deliverer	Call for Sponsorship	Amici della Reggia	

Source: Authors' re-elaboration from Bovaird (2007)

In sum, even though the value of co-production is generally overlooked by both managers and front-office employees of the Royal Palace of Caserta, it is currently exploited in an implicit way to achieve several crucial aims, including the protection and the promotion of the cultural heritage and the improvement of the accessibility to the site. As a consequence, the full potential of community engagement and service co-production is not fully unleashed. Rather, community members and users are usually discouraged in performing as co-producers of value. This is especially true with regards to tourists, who are not involved in the activities aimed at the promotion and the enhancement of cultural heritage. Therefore, they still behave as mere consumers of tourist services, with a poor identification in the cultural and historical values of the site.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Limitations and further developments

This study shows several limitations, which affect its reliability. The focus on a single case study did not allow to generalize the findings achieved, as well as to expand them to similar

national or international cultural and historical sites. However, in the light of the originality of the topic examined and of the exploratory nature of this research, the single case study methodology was considered useful to achieve an increased understanding of a contemporary and complex phenomenon, like service co-production in the field of cultural heritage management. Moreover, the adoption of a cross-sectional perspective influenced the consistency of this study. Further developments should be addressed at filling these weaknesses, as well as at providing more reliable results. In particular, a comparative case study is convenient to check the validity of the theoretical framework used for the purpose of this study and to collect more robust findings. In addition, an evolutionary analysis of both community engagement and service co-production in a single case study is expected to provide interesting insights to advance the scientific and practical knowledge in the field of cultural heritage management.

6.2 Practical implications

The engagement of the community and of the users in the promotion of cultural heritage is imperative to achieve enhanced conditions of sustainability in the management of cultural and historical sites. Indeed, the co-production of services turns out to be beneficial to both users and providing organizations assigned to the management of cultural heritage. On the one hand, it contributes in the enhancement of service quality, paving the way for increased user satisfaction and loyalty. On the other hand, it implies the establishment of a shared identity around the cultural and historical values of the site, thus encouraging the commitment of both the community and the users to the enhancement of the cultural heritage.

Managers and operators seem to be sceptic about the effects of co-production. In fact, they generally consider that the engagement of external stakeholders in the promotion and protection of cultural heritage could negatively affect its authenticity, thus undermining the preservation of its identity. However, in spite of the prevailing hostility toward community engagement and co-production of services, the current period of financial distress offers a significant opportunity to endorse value co-creation and engage both the community and the users in the enhancement of cultural heritage and improvement of tourist services quality.

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