

Value co-creation in the hospitality industry: learning from the Vascitour experience¹

Received
03rd September 2018

Revised
18th September 2018

Accepted
22nd November 2018

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: *This paper aims to explore the processes of value co-creation in the hospitality industry according to customer-dominant (C-D) logic.*

Methodology: *This study follows a qualitative approach. Through an in-depth case-study analysis, the proposed research examines the empirical evidence of Vascitour, a startup formed as cooperative in May 2016 in the Italian hospitality industry.*

Findings: *The most interesting result seems to refer to the idea that value co-creation in hospitality industry is connected to the interactive service context that is generated between customer ecosystem and provider's service system. In the Vascitour case, it depends on the interaction in local culture that is created through the unique and authentic interaction with service provider, hosts, other guests/travelers, and physical structure related to service.*

Research limits: *This paper presents the same limits that every single case study analysis has, such as inter-related issues of methodological rigor, researcher's subjectivity, and external validity. Moreover, final considerations cannot be generalized because of the subjectivity of the choice of the sampling, the selection of interviewees and the limited number of managed interviews.*

Practical implications: *This paper suggests to value co-create in experiential terms by considering the immersion of customers/guests in the service delivery process and in local culture, to create experiences connected to the spirit of the place and its people, and to replicate Vascitour's formula in other contexts by considering customers subjective logic and local peculiarities of territory.*

Originality of the paper: *In addition to be original in itself in the Italian context, the case Vascitour proposed for this study is one of the examples of value co-creation in the hospitality industry that enables to concrete the studies hitherto conducted only theoretically.*

Key words: customer and service dominant logic; hotel; customers' experiences; service provider; host; uniqueness and authenticity

¹ A preliminary version of the paper was first presented to the Sinergie-SIMA 2017 Conference. The current version is the result of a redrafting carried out by the Authors after the conference, thanks to the additional comments received by reviewers. The current version is therefore original and unpublished.

1. Introduction

In today's competitive environment, more and more hospitality firms are customer oriented and focused on experience-based offers (Knutson *et al.*, 2006). They aim to create memorable experiences by not only meeting hedonistic needs and expectations of customers or tourists (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Van Boven and Gilovich, 2003), but also exceeding their wants (Oliver *et al.*, 1997). Some hospitality firms attempt to offer multicultural and complete hospitality experiences (Scott *et al.*, 2009; Miao, 2011) by involving their guests at a sensorial, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and relational level rather than merely in functional terms (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Lashley, 2008). In other words, they develop interactions with their guests by encouraging a joint process of value creation.

Within the field of service research, goods-dominant (G-D) logic, service-dominant (S-D) logic and customer-dominant (C-D) logic were developed to depict the process of value creation from different perspectives. Opposite to G-D logic, according to which value is generated by exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), S-D logic emphasises the role of customers/guests in the process of value creation: far from being simple experiential service recipients, they turn into collaborative partners able to 'co-create' value with the company/hotel (Lusch *et al.*, 2007; Vargo and Lusch, 2008a,b; Dalli, 2009; Grönroos, 2011; Yi and Gong, 2013; Stampacchia *et al.*, 2016). The more recent C-D logic (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010) proposes a truly customer-centric focus according to which the value is formed by the customers' life and experiences (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013), as well as by their perception about reality and interactions with others.

Even if (service) marketing scholars still know little about the inner nature of this value, the way its process of creation develops (when it starts, what it includes and when it ends) and the way that it is co-created (or co-produced) (Grönroos and Voima, 2011) or emerges (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013), general agreement seems to prevail about the need for 'creating an experience environment in which consumers can have active dialogue and co-construct personalized experiences' (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004b, p. 8). For example, hotels provide their guests with individually customised travel and hospitality experiences (Erdly and Kesterson-Townes, 2003) by offering holistic experiential services through both servicescape (i.e., service environment) design and development of frontline personnel competencies (Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013).

According to the above, many studies have been developed within the hospitality management literature aimed at exploring, on the one hand, the creation of memorable experiences in this industry (e.g., Walls *et al.*, 2011b; Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013; Torres, 2016) and, on the other, value co-creation among customers and companies of the hospitality industry, such as hotels and Airbnb (e.g., Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009; Della Corte and Micera, 2011; Conti and Moriconi, 2012; Della Corte and Di Taranto, 2014; Navarro *et al.*, 2014; Navarro *et al.*, 2016; Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2016). The few examples of co-creation with tourists that are found in the hospitality industry are mainly theoretically based and propose cases

without a specific and in-depth analysis. Accordingly, empirical research is still in its infancy and needs further investigation (e.g., Rihova *et al.*, 2013).

This paper aims, therefore, to fill the existing research gap by exploring the processes of value co-creation according to C-D logic. Through an in-depth case-study analysis, the proposed research examines the empirical evidence of Vascitour. Vascitour is not a hotel but a platform that offers experiential trips in Naples by putting tourists in contact with the local inhabitants and enabling them to experience the city in an authentic and customised way.

The paper is organised as follows: after proposing a literature review about value-creation theory and memorable experiences arising in the hospitality industry, the adopted methodology is described and the results from the case study are discussed. Theoretical and practical implications for hospitality management are presented. Finally, the study concludes with limitations and further directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Value-creation theory according to goods-dominant, service-dominant and customer-dominant perspectives

Value creation ‘is one of the most ill-defined and elusively used concepts in service marketing’ (Grönroos, 2012, p. 1521). The ongoing debate in service research about this topic has hitherto led to the production-oriented (G-D logic), service-oriented (S-D logic) and customer-oriented (C-D logic) perspectives (see Table 1).

Tab. 1: Value creation according to G-D, S-D and C-D logic

	G-D logic	S-D logic	C-D logic
Value concept	value is embedded in units of output	value is embedded within systems of service exchange	value is embedded in dynamic, collective and shared customer experience/realities
Domain of value creation	value is deliberately created in the service-provider domain	value is deliberately co-created with the customer (beneficiary) in the service provider-customer interaction domain	value is formed in the customer’s own life and experiences domain
Type of value	value-in-exchange	value-in-use	value-in-experience

Source: Our adaptation of Heinonen *et al.* (2013) and Heinonen and Strandvik (2015)

G-D logic is focused on goods and exchange. More precisely, the goods’ tangibility enables identification of the value connected to the goods themselves. In this sense, the value is associated with the goods in the determination phase of its entity and it is embedded in units of output. In this conception, the exchange operation originates because customers

identify a mere correspondence between the need perceived and the qualitative and quantitative attributes of the product for which they choose to endure an economic sacrifice. The value is, therefore, generated by the subject of the exchange rather than by the actors that carried it out or by the ways in which such exchange manifests itself in the marketplace. In brief, the value is determined by the manufacturer and is defined within the definition of value-in-exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). With the development of new management and marketing tendencies such as customer relationship management and experience economy, G-D logic has become little representative of the current ever-changing reality. Companies, on the one hand, operate and decide by relating to the context differently than in the past and customers, on the other, no longer buy a product in a passive way by merely making economic choices with regard to the offer that companies propose. The result is the need to shift the focus to a logic that better reflects the reality in which companies, customers and other stakeholders operate, that is, S-D logic.

According to S-D logic, service is interpreted as ‘the application of competencies (knowledge and skills) for the benefit of another party’ (Vargo and Lusch, 2008a, p. 256) or ‘of another entity or the entity itself’ (Lusch and Vargo 2014, p. 12). The value is not embedded in goods but, as already explicated by past service logic (Grönroos, 2006) that emphasises the interaction between the provider and the customer, the value in S-D logic depends on value-in-use from which customers can benefit through their involvement in the service interaction process (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Payne *et al.*, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2008a,b; Dalli, 2009; Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Yi and Gong, 2013; Stampacchia *et al.*, 2016). The value is co-created. What is new in S-D logic is the focus on the customers’ willingness for interaction, as well as their active participation in the value co-creation process. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a, p. 7) argued, these interactive processes that ‘allow the individual consumer to co-create unique experiences’ are the basis of the process of value co-creation because of the customers’ wish for interaction. The value is created in a different way for each of the customers who interact with the company. Accordingly, the uniqueness of the value is related to how each customer decides to relate to those who make value propositions and to the way the value generated during use is perceived by each customer on the basis of its intrinsic characteristics. To meet customers’ needs and characteristics, companies become value facilitators, that is, they make available to customers the tools necessary for the value creation.

C-D logic argues that both products and services are the basis of value (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015) and that services are a function of the human experience (Ramaswamy, 2011). More precisely, the value is ‘embedded in the customer’s context, activities, practices, and experiences’ (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013, p. 533), thus belonging to the customer’s own life domain. This means, therefore, that the value creation takes place not within the firm’s action sphere but within the customer’s field of experiences. Customers particularly perceive the value on the basis of value-in-experience given that their reality links with the realities of others such as family members, friends and co-workers. C-D logic stresses the

activities and experiences of customers beyond their perceptions of the offers and market interactions (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010). Depending on the existing interactions between and among the actors, the value-creation process establishes as an interactive route within which the experience of the human being poses as the core of service (Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2010). Both customers and all the other stakeholders may be involved in the mentioned process, developing a new and broader perspective of value (Ramaswamy, 2009). This last aspect works as a multi-subjective issue, relying on the way customers' experiences are co-constructed within a given collective social context (Schembri, 2006; Edvardsson *et al.*, 2010). In this sense, 'on vacation with family, customers live their life and vacation also through the eyes of their children and other family members interpreting their value experiences. The reality of family members is part of their own reality and the value formation is embedded in the multi-subjective experience comprising the multiple internal and external contexts of the customer and her family members. The individual is not at focus but the whole customer ecosystem is relevant, referring to a network of actors, activities and practices that shape and are shaped by experiences' (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013, p. 112). Accordingly, it is important to understand how a firm's offer can be embedded in customers' lives/business (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010).

2.2 *Creating memorable experiences in the hospitality industry in a value co-creation perspective*

According to the experience economy theory (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), 'customers do not buy service delivery, they buy experiences; they do not buy service quality, they buy memories' (Hemmington, 2007, p. 749). It is therefore not surprising that providing excellent customer experiences has become a core objective in the hospitality industry (Kandampully *et al.*, 2015; Hwang and Seo, 2016). Customer experience is defined as 'events that engage individuals in a personal way' in terms of emotional, physical, intellectual or spiritual engagement (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p. 12). One of its main characteristics is, therefore, subjectivity. On the basis of this definition, companies should provide goods or services to produce a good customer experience (Schmitt, 1999). In this regard, the value of customer experience is usually labelled as a multidimensional concept (e.g., Schmitt, 1999; Gentile *et al.*, 2007; Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Bagdare and Jain, 2013). Schmitt (1999) particularly identified five dimensions of customer experience: (1) sensory experiences linked to sight, touch and smell (sense); (2) affective experiences such as moods and feelings (feel); (3) cognitive experiences associated with thinking or conscious processes (think); (4) physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyles that are attributable to the product itself or its consumption/use (act); and (5) social identity experiences or relationships with others (relate).

More recent studies highlight that experiences occur throughout the consumption chain because of the active interaction between companies and customers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a; Mascarenhas *et al.*, 2006): the experiences are co-created by customers in the process of service

design, delivery and consumption (Carù and Cova, 2003, 2007; Chathoth *et al.*, 2016), rather than being provided by companies. Verhoef *et al.* (2009) noted that it embraces social, physical and emotional dimensions along more phases, from searching for information to post-trip activities.

In the hospitality literature, many elements are considered important to provide customers with a memorable experience, such as (1) themes and underlying concepts of hospitality products (Gilmore and Pine, 2002); (2) physical environment (e.g., Berry *et al.*, 2002; Hemmington, 2007; Walls *et al.*, 2011a); (3) technical quality (Berry *et al.*, 2002; Brunner-Sperdin and Peters, 2009); (4) memorability (Prebensen and Rosengren, 2016); and (5) hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement and novelty (Kim *et al.*, 2010). In addition, several studies have emphasised the relevance of both the employees' behaviour and attitude in creating successful experiences (e.g., Lashley, 2008; Hemmington, 2007; Walls *et al.*, 2011a; Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013), and their interpersonal relations (e.g., Pullman and Gross, 2004; Brunner-Sperdin and Peters, 2009; Hemmington, 2007; Walls *et al.*, 2011a).

Few examples of co-creation with tourists can be found in the hospitality industry. Particularly, some scholars have presented a framework for customer engagement and co-creation with reference to hospitality transactions (Chathoth *et al.*, 2016). Other studies have examined how service suppliers and buyer value co-creation influence buyers' attitudes towards service providers (Navarro *et al.*, 2014), successful factors for co-creation between hotels and disabled customers (Navarro *et al.*, 2015), and the relationship between value co-creation and customer satisfaction in spa services (Navarro *et al.*, 2016). Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) highlighted that hotels are moving towards the two following directions: (1) supplying co-creation experiences generated in a virtual setting through rooms with futuristic and technologic style and (2) providing customers with the opportunity of living 'like-a-local' by experiencing the culture and daily life of a local, such as a typical dinner in a private home setting. In this regard, different local experiences are available in European cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Barcelona, Lisbon, Madrid and Stockholm. According to the mentioned perspective, Paulauskaite *et al.* (2016) argued that unique accommodation interiors and atmosphere, interactions with hosts and interactions with local culture are important, for example, for Airbnb users.

Given that the cases presented in these studies are not examined in depth, this paper proposes the experience of Vascitour for its original hospitality formula in Italy as a best-practice example, that is, as business excellence in a particular benchmark. Although the concept of best practice is generally vaguely defined, it is used to describe leading industry cases (Hallencreutz and Turner, 2011).

3. Method

3.1 The case study

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'Vascitour' is a project of alternative experiential tourism founded by Achille, Anna, Marianna and Ilaria, all coming from Naples. The co-founders met for the first time during a training course for innovative start-up held in Naples in the Contamination Lab and organised by Federico II University. Here, the funders shared their ideas: similar to many tourists, they had started to look for a new way in which to gain in-depth knowledge about the history and culture of a given place; as Neapolitans, they aimed to initiate a radical change in the traditional image of certain neglected neighbourhoods in the city, usually labelled as dangerous and criminal places. With time, the project has attained its identity: nowadays, Vascitour aims to promote experiential stays and visits in Naples, starting from the older and fascinating narrow alleys (*vicoli*) and the small houses at street level (*vasci*) usually excluded from the traditional tourist routes. Thanks to the new Vascitour formula, tourists may experience the city, connecting to its history, people and culture in an unusual way.

Vascitour started its activities as a cooperative for job and production in May 2016 after having won a competition promoted by Coopstartup, a project aimed at giving rise to new cooperative start-ups, and receiving 10,000 euro to fund their initiative. Achille Centro is responsible for communication and promotion of the activities planned by Vascitour; Anna Bottone, social media manager, is responsible for communication and planning of the activities aimed mainly at foreign visitors; Marianna di Fiore, chief operation officer, manages the administrative issues of the company; Ilaria delli Colli, chief creative officer, is responsible for web design.

Vascitour offers to its customers three types of experience, namely, 'Sleep', 'Eat' and 'Visit', all planned to allow visitors to keep in contact with locals, sharing with them everyday life activities, customs and traditional atmosphere.

1. *Sleep*. With this option, guests choose one of the *vasci*, where they spend their nights during their stay in the city. The Vascitour team has selected nine of the best and traditional *vasci* in Naples. Technically, the *vascio* is a typical small house, with one or two rooms, at street level, usually located in one of the most ancient districts of the city. Here, everyday life activities develop in close contact with both the street and the city life, providing a more genuine and folkloristic background in which to enjoy the traditional atmosphere of the city.
2. *Eat* (Figure 1a). This option may be considered a true experience of 'social eating'. Patrons choose among six different places to sample a typical Neapolitan lunch or dinner. These places are not restaurants, but private homes where '*vascichefs*' offer traditional menus, allowing the guests to embrace the true lifestyle of the locals.
3. *Visit*. Vascitour offers a mix of alternative and more traditional guided tours in the core of the city. Customers choose among the four following options:

- a. *O' nciucio*. In Naples, *O' nciucio* refers to the common practice of gossip about something or someone, which gives rise to trivia and stories. Everything may be object of a gossip: the only important issue is that the unlucky doesn't know anything about it. Accordingly, the tour starts from the entrance of the metro station (Toledo) and enters the narrow streets of the Spanish district to explore the city as described by the storytelling of local people. Visitors are invited to enjoy coffee, meet local shopkeepers and eat traditional fried pizza (Figure 1b).
- b. *O' cipp a Forcella* (Figure 1c). With this tour, Vascitour aims to raise awareness in tourists of Forcella, an anonymous street usually unknown to tourists, except for crime news. However, Forcella is a charming street that is part of the well-known Spaccanapoli (where Nativity scenes are created by skilled craftsmen). The so-called 'Cippo a Forcella' is located in Calenda, one of the main squares of Forcella. This is a mound of stones that, in ancient times, were part of the Greco-Roman Naples city walls. Today, the expression 'Cippo a Forcella' is commonly used by Neapolitans to refer to something that is very old or ancient. As with the previous tour, visitors are invited to meet local fishmongers and to taste coffee and typical pan-fried *zeppole* and potato fritters.
- c. *Le capuzzelle e le anime pezzentelle (Little skulls and poor souls)* (Figure 1d). This tour gives patrons the opportunity to experience the Sanità district and the way people live in one of the most ancient and traditional neighbourhoods of the city. A long walk starts from Borgo delle Vergini (hamlet), with its colourful and lively market, and proceeds along the main street to finally arrive at the *cimitero delle fontanelle* (the cemetery of the water fountains), so-called for the presence of spring waters. This cemetery, located in a giant tuff cave, is a clear example of the way Neapolitans relate to the afterlife, combining the sacred and the profane. The tour ends with a chance to taste the local delicacies-cakes and coffee.
- d. *A' lietto stritto cuccate' mmiezo (When the bed is small, sleep in the middle)*. This tour guides tourists into the oriental periphery of the city, namely, the district of San Giovanni a Teduccio. San Giovanni a Teduccio is the place where the first railway industry of Italy was built, allowing citizens to travel from Naples to Portici. The factory closed in 1975 and was later converted into a railway museum: the Museum of Pietrarsa. The museum is one of Italy's most important industrial archaeology centres and a national symbol of railway culture-a unique exhibition in Italy for its individuality, the wealth of contents on show, and the absolute affinity between the history of its architecture and the story it tells. After visiting the museum, visitors may walk along the promenade and meet the fishermen of the association known as 'Fishermen for Hobby' as well as the local citizens. The tour ends with a brunch in the home of a family in the district.

For all the available tours, visitors can choose to be guided by *FrataMMè*. *FrataMMè* is a non-conventional guide-a Neapolitan coming from one of

the local districts and deeply embedded in the local traditions, culture and customs. *FrataMMè* knows people, stories and places that are usually excluded from the common tourist routes. Thanks to him or her, patrons may enjoy a really memorable experience.

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Fig. 1: Vascitour's offers



Source: Vascitour's website

3.2 Research design

This study follows a qualitative approach with a single case-study method. This choice is supported by both Yin (2003) - who states that this method is particularly useful to explore a contemporary phenomenon (for which multiple sources of evidence are needed) within its real-life context - and Lamnek (2010) - who highlights the importance of the single case study in depicting concrete realities and gathering the perception of real people involved in such realities. This method enables a holistic understanding of respondents' experiences that cannot be achieved otherwise (Kulik *et al.*, 2012). In addition, it enables an in-depth investigation and the inspiration for new ideas (Siggelkow, 2007). Vascitour is the selected case because it is an interesting example of a hospitality business heavily engaged in providing memorable experiences in terms of value co-creation.

3.3 Data collection procedure

Three sources were employed for data collection: face-to-face semi-structured interviews, participatory research and analyses of secondary sources (Creswell, 2009; Lamnek, 2010). Key stakeholders of Vascitour, such as founders, hosts who are involved in this business activity and guests who have already enjoyed the experience, were approached by email. The email informed them about the research topic, highlighting its purpose and providing a brief overview of the issues to be covered during the interview. This method enables researchers to capture interviewees' thoughts, perceptions, feelings and experiences in accordance with the purpose of the research (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2005).

The choice to interview both founders and guests lay in the need to picture both the customers' world (core activity and experience, related activities and experiences, and other activities) and the services company's world (support processes, backstage actions and onstage actions), as they were examined in the T-model by Heinonen *et al.* (2010).

With regard to the customer's world, the interviews were designed to collect information about all three topics belonging to C-D logic, namely, core activity and experience, related activities and experiences, and other activities and experiences. Eight in-depth interviews were undertaken with tourists who had visited Naples by using the Vascitour services: two from Denmark, one from Naples and five from other Italian cities.

Face-to-face interviews were also arranged with the founders, following 'a conversation with purpose' (Burgess *et al.*, 1991) approach, which allows the detail of the answers, as well as the order of the questions, to vary. This approach facilitated collection of information about the activity and how it started, understanding of the way activities are planned and developed, and investigation of the drivers underlying the adoption of the Vascitour formula. Each interview lasted about 2 hours. Adoption of investigator triangulation (Jack and Raturi, 2006) - in this case, by interviewing multiple observers - enabled us to overcome common problems related to single-source bias.

Adoption of participatory research by actively engaging with the people working at Vascitour within their natural environment and experiencing their everyday lives allowed us to gather information about their behaviour, activities and personal perceptions. In addition, documents and materials available on the institutional website were analysed.

These three data collection activities are further representation of triangulation to strengthen the research findings and corroborate the data.

3.4 Data analysis

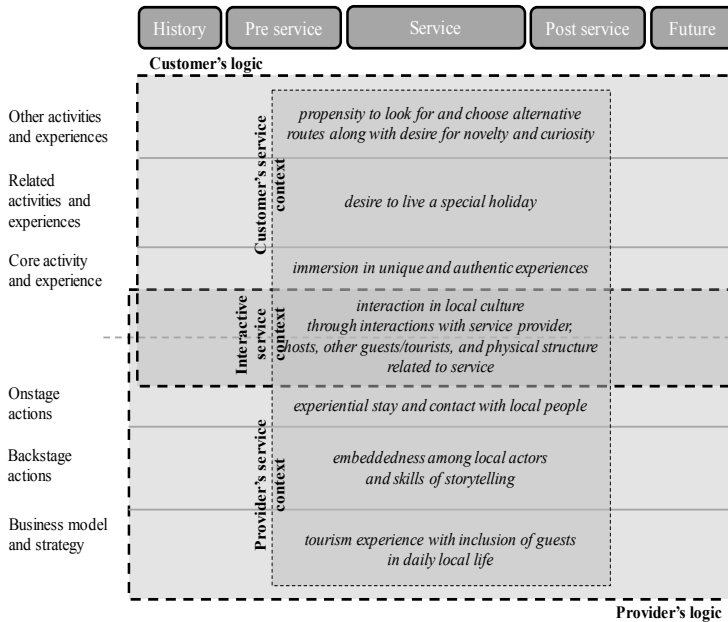
The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed and checked for accuracy. To examine the data, content analysis was undertaken (Stemler, 2001) via Qualitative Solutions and Research (QSR) NVivo 10 software. The coding of themes was inductively carried out (Saldana, 2009) in relation to the study's purpose to provide memorable experiences in terms of value creation. Findings were organised and discussed according to Heinonen and Strandvik's (2015) model that expands the T-model developed by Heinonen *et al.* (2010). The customer's service context (core activity and experience, related activities and experiences, and other activities and experiences) was examined, in addition to the provider's service context (onstage actions, backstage actions, and business model and strategy), to provide a full picture of the way in which Vascitour enables a process of value co-creation according to C-D logic. The interactive service context was identified between the provider's and the customer's service contexts.

4. Results and discussion

In this section, the results are presented and discussed sequentially in relation to the three following contexts: (1) provider's service, (2) customer's service and (3) interactive service. Figure 2 shows the results that emerged by analysis of the Vascitour case as they developed according to C-D logic.

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Fig. 2: The Vascitour case according to C-D logic



Source: Our adaptation of Heinonen and Strandvik (2015)

4.1 The provider's service context

According to the proposed theoretical perspective, the onstage actions (experiential stay and contact with local people), backstage actions (embeddedness among local actors and skills of storytelling), and business model and strategy (tourism experience with inclusion of guests in daily local life) belong to the provider's service context.

4.1.1 Onstage actions

The available services-sleep, eat and visit-promote experiential stays in Naples, allowing the visitors to interact with local people by sleeping in a *vascio*; eating as a guest in someone else's home; and visiting areas that usually are not included in classic tours, having locals as guides. Although Achille, Anna, Marianna and Ilaria initially used the guided tours as a 'pilot experiment', the option 'sleep in a *vascio*' embodies all the symbols and meanings that they wish to revitalise.

Historically, the *vascio* is a symbol of poverty and social exclusion. In 1881, there were 20,000 *vasci*, housing about 100,000 Neapolitans, while in 1911, their number had doubled, housing 220,000 citizens. In 1884, more than 7000 Neapolitans died in the city because of an outbreak of cholera; thereafter, authorities prohibited people from living in the *vasci*. Many *vasci* were also closed during Fascism and after the Second World War, and their number, grown further in the meantime, dropped profoundly to 65,000 units. Nowadays, the number of *vasci* is 40,000, which unfortunately appears set to reduce in future years; thus, the *vasci* will return to their original function of storage (Milano, 2016; Celotto, 2012).

Enabling tourists to sleep in one of the remaining *vasci* gives them the chance to develop a memorable and unique experience, being embedded in the local reality. If you stay in a *vascio*, you live half your time on the street. Life in a *vascio* mixes and develops together with the life in the street: people know one another, and even foreigners cannot travel through here without being involved in the most folkloristic, tragic and comic reality of the Western world.

The same leitmotiv has also inspired the idea of 'social eating' (the Eat option). Eating in one of the available places allows tourists not only to taste traditional foods but also to 'share' the atmosphere that develops in the host's home because of the direct relationship with the home owners. In the *vascio* of Nunzia, for example, the owner offers a full menu 'made at home', revealing the secrets of this unique *basso* (an alternative name for *vascio*) where the traditional raffle (*tombola verace*) was first played in 1977. During the Second World War, this *basso* was also used as a brothel, and the owners keep some evidence of that period (Pugliariello, 2009).

'Living' Naples also means to share its inner multiculturalism and the mixes of ethnicities that have always characterised the city. In Foria Street, at the edge of Sanità, guests may eat at a *monzù*. A *monzù* is a monsieur, a Royal chef who between the 18th and the 19th centuries cooked delicious meals for nobles and kings. The word *monzù* itself refers to those chefs who arrived in Naples following Napoleon's army in 1805. The *monzù* cooked soufflés, mousses, and choux at the Royal Palace of Naples, and in 1815, when the French Court had to leave the city, the chefs remained in the city by the request of the local aristocratic families. The original French recipes were adapted to the local taste by the Neapolitan chefs, who quickly changed the French ragoût, gâteau and choux into *ragù*, *gattò* and *sciù* (Marchese, 2012). Nowadays, Mr Enzo, descendant of a *monzù*, and his wife Antonia offer their meals, enjoying with the visitors traditional music and Neapolitan theatrical performances.

The presence of *FrataMMè* additionally enriches the onstage actions belonging to the provider's service context with an original alternative to the traditional official guide. While institutional tourist guides describe the history and relevance of monuments and places, *FrataMMè* does much more. Coming from the same districts where the tourists are going to go, *FrataMMè* knows all the hidden and secret places and the way in which these places are 'lived' and perceived by the locals. Moreover, he or she knows the locals and their customs, thus enabling the visitors to relate and interact with them, creating a unique experience. Accordingly, the tourists'

experiences result as the output of complex and unique relationships that make them unique and unrepeatably, even for the same customers.

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4.1.2 Backstage actions

Finding *vasci* to host people was not easy, nor the selection of the places for social eating. At the beginning, the team looked for new hosts by scanning houses 'for rent', but soon realised that this method would not work: most of those houses were not *vasci* or, when they were, poor condition made them inadequate to host people. The next step was to look for accommodation solutions proposed on existing web platforms, such as booking.com or Airbnb, to identify which ones were *vasci*. However, a definite turning point in the process of host selection was walking along the narrow streets of the Spanish district and meeting locals and explaining to them what they were looking for. This choice, together with an intensive presence on social networks such as Facebook, Google+ and Tumblr, allowed Achille and his co-founders to become acquainted with many new people, most of who support their initiatives: some owners have contacted Vascitour, proposing their *vascio* to host tourists, while others have been selected thanks to 'word of mouth'. Being embedded in the district everyday life has been relevant to establish genuine and intensive personal relationships with locals, as well as to find the 'right' people with whom to collaborate for the success of the Vascitour project - for example, it is considered important that Anna herself moved to the Spanish district to live.

With regard to 'social eating' - which means to eat at the home of a family instead of in a restaurant - it is important to point out that it is not a common or successful practice in Naples. Despite this, a growing number of tourists have the chance to experience it thanks to the efforts of Vascitour: most of the routes, for example, are planned to allow the visitors to have a lunch or dinner in one of the selected houses. With each of the available options, however, the presence of 'something special' (Interview cited) - in the place or in the way locals relate with their guests - was claimed as a relevant selection criterion in addition to the authenticity and goodness of the offered foods.

The 'guided tours' are planned to bring guests to the lesser known places of the city - enhancing the beauty of often forgotten streets and monuments - as well as to show them the working-class neighbourhoods, their markets, their history and their everyday life. Achille, Anna, Marianna and Ilaria are not professional tourist guides: they 'tell' about the places that they are visiting, providing an anthropological interpretation of local customs and behaviours. This is the reason why Vascitour's founders proposed calling the tours 'urban routes' rather than guided tours.

4.1.3 Business model and strategy

Vascitour's business model and strategy is based on the founders' wish to reshape Neapolitan hospitality by considering a stranger as a Neapolitan. Accordingly, Vascitour has created the claim 'The guest is one of us' to

emphasise how guests' inclusion is a fundamental ingredient of the Naples community. Essentially, the value proposition of Vascitour is bringing to light the hidden city of Naples with its peculiarities and uniqueness. From this point of view, forgotten monuments, hidden churches, secret gardens, artisans, artists, curiosities and flavours of ancient recipes are made available to those who want to experience participated tourism.

Day-by-day activities are supported by the institutional web page as well as by the social networks. Even if the institutional Vascitour web page shows all the available services, allowing customers to select and reserve one or more 'travelling experiences', it is through the social network that people acquire more information about the kind of experience they are going to live. Photos and videos of previous guided tours, folkloristic images of the hosts, and news about Vascitour activities are uploaded, providing a unique and original collection that is not available on the institutional web page. As noted above, Vascitour is present on all the social networks and communities: Facebook, Google+, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube. Each of the mentioned supporting tools is used in a different way to achieve the most efficient communication of the company's actions, as well as to manage both pre-service and post-service activities.

The Facebook home page allows people to share comments and ideas about their experience with Vascitour, as well as to give suggestions to future tourists. By this, the online community adds to the real community in supporting the customers' process of value co-creation.

Twitter is used to inform the general community about what Vascitour is planning as a social firm, the competitions it wins or the institutional events where it is invited to describe its experience as a successful company. Google+ is used to inform customers about the most important events that take place in the city and about the services that Vascitour offers to allow guests to experience these events in the most alternative and authentic way. Google+ was also used to look for hosts among the community of *vasci* owners. Pinterest is used to post photos of Vascitour's founders and their own experience as a company, while Tumblr and Instagram are used to upload images of tourists' experiences in Naples or images of the city, particularly referring to beauty and unknown places: in accordance, the most famous icons and images of the city are usually excluded from the selected gallery.

4.2 The customer's service context

Following the above, the core activity and experience, related activities and experiences, and other activities and experiences all belong to the customer's service context.

4.2.1 Core activity and experience

Customers can create their own experience by choosing a single tour or a complete trip experience, which means that they may reserve guided tours, 'sleep at ...' and 'eat at ...' options in one place. The reservation itself may be made through the website or through a call to the staff, who are

available to assist in planning the experience according to each customer's needs and expectations. Nevertheless, all the options offer visitors the chance to join local people and the genuine traditions of the city. During the visits or dinners, interactive workshops are offered by local 'experts' (e.g., housewives and older people who can describe the history and local traditions), who know the traditional food specialties of Neapolitan gastronomy and how to cook them, as well as the most famous local songs and dances. In doing this, the Neapolitan language is used to explain idioms and sayings. This experience of co-creation is unique because customers can exceed their perceptions of offers and market interactions through local hosts with truthfulness, personality and hospitality.

All the respondents emphasised complete satisfaction with the experience. In answer to the question 'What made your experience with Vascitour so special?' or 'What made it different from other travelling experiences that you have enjoyed in the past?', the tourists spoke about their tours in charming places that they would not have had the chance to visit and appreciate without Vascitour - which was the case even for customers from Naples. In one case, a visitor from Naples answered:

Visiting the Spanish district is what I wish to do in every other place where I go for holidays. I have always enjoyed experiencing the unique and authentic atmosphere of a new place, as if I am a local, more than a tourist. But this is not always possible.

In addition, visitors who were not from Naples appreciated the immersion in a unique and authentic experience, as well as the chance to relate with locals:

What made the tour with Vascitour so special is first and foremost getting behind the scenes, visiting Neapolitans in their daily environment.

Vascitour gave me the chance to live an unusual tourist experience, thanks to the direct, informal and personal contact with the locals.

Visiting hidden 'treasures' was not the only key factor that made the customers' experience special - another was being embedded in the locals' life and customs. One of the tourists from Denmark said:

What made my experience so special was coming into contact with locals ... they wanted to show their neighbourhood and its beauty ... this is a strength of Vascitour. Moreover ... well ... locals are authentically involved that means their hospitality is not inspired by merely commercial ends. This is what I felt ... They had a passion ... the passion to host visitors.

Relating with Neapolitans, whether selected hosts where guests sleep for one or more nights or families where patrons take part in social dining, allows customers to enjoy a unique experience, different from any other, and feel that they are not a paying guest but a friend. Under such circumstances, tourists, hosts, locals and the firm are all involved in a process of value co-creation. As one tourist answered:

The family where we slept usually spent time with us during the dinner ... the food was simple but very good ... it looked like a dinner among friends ... it didn't seem that we were payers.

4.2.2 Related activities and experiences

Collecting useful information about related activities and experiences was not easy, mainly because customers are not aware about the way they affect, or not, the core activity and experience, finally influencing the process of value co-creation. From the examined empirical evidence, some questions were proposed to understand which kinds of activity were undertaken by tourists during their stay in Naples. Four customers (two from Denmark, one from Northern Italy and one from Naples) did not sleep in a *vascio*, applying only for the 'Visit' and the 'Eat' options with Vascitour. However, the tourists who chose to book alternative accommodation did not refer to this as an important driver of their satisfaction, mainly focusing on what, according to their own perception, made their holiday so special. In addition, none of the selected tourists explored Naples with other tour operators during the same stay in the city. This means, therefore, that their entire travel experience was undertaken with Vascitour's support.

4.2.3 Other activities and experiences

Being an 'expert tourist' and 'to travel in a group/alone' were considered important issues in understanding the way other activities and experiences affect customers' perception about their experience with Vascitour. Referring to the first issue, travelling at least twice a year was considered a valid reason to look for and to choose alternative routes, far from the traditional more famous tours and destinations. With reference to the examined empirical evidence, the collected information confirms that all the tourists consider themselves 'travel experts'. Additionally, they emphasised, during the interview, their wish to look for 'something new', 'to live an authentic experience' and 'to be far from the most famous, commercial and crowded destinations'. These types of tourist fit well with those to whom Vascitour's offers are aimed, and this is the reason why they were so enthusiastic about the experience. This means, therefore, that the process of value co-creation needs not only the interaction among all the parties (not only customers and service provider) involved in the experience, but also a coherence between certain traits of the customers' world (namely what the customers look for in a given experience) and the service-company world (which kind of service the provider aims to offer). Even if this is not a new topic in both the marketing and the service fields of research, it appears less investigated within C-D logic, mainly referring to the way in which past activities and experiences modify the way a given customer or tourist perceives and participates in value creation.

In regard to the second issue, 'to travel in a group/alone', collected data confirm that the tourists were accustomed to travelling in a group (family or friends). In one of the examined interviews, the tourist was himself the guide for a small group of students coming from a foreign university: this opens for future investigations about, for example, the way in which travelling alone or in a group modifies the individual perception of a given experience, finally shaping alternative models of value co-creation. Nevertheless, little additional information may be added from this data because of the homogeneity of the selected sample.

4.3 The interactive service context

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The interactive service context arises because of the overlapping between the customer ecosystem and the provider's service system. In the Vascitour case, it depends on the interaction, within local culture, among the service provider, the different hosts, the other guests and the physical structure related to the service.

From the point of view of the interaction with the service provider, all the respondents underlined the competences of the Vascitour team, mainly referring to the professionalism and the enthusiasm of Achille and Anna. Achille, in particular, impressed tourists with his in-depth knowledge about the city, which, combined with his capacity to convey information about places and monuments, engendered a genuine familiarity with people and places. One of the interviewees said:

Although visiting unknown places and relating with locals make the visit of Naples so different from all the others, it wouldn't be the same thing without Achille.

In addition, previous experiences around the world as tourists, as well as other visitors' different personalities and cultures with which the Vascitour experience was shared, added value to the experience itself.

Further, the interaction with hosts is equally fundamental because they welcome guests and make them feel like one of them, as well as provide information as 'teachers' about local customs and traditions. One of the interviewees said:

Even if only for three days, I felt part of the environment. Seeing the ladies sitting outside talking to me brought me to stay with them. I felt in symbiosis with the local customs.

For example, having a dinner in a local house in which hosts entertain guests with their typical personality and storytelling about local life aspects places guests themselves in a distinguished and unique place that is appreciated more than a standard restaurant or pizzeria.

The Vascitour case study confirms the relevance of the locals in the perception that customers have of memorable experiences (Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2016), thus supporting the idea that the firm's boundaries overcome its own organisational structure to involve new actors in the complex process of value co-creation (Heinonen and Stradvick, 2015).

During the dinners or lunches at the homes of local hosts, the offering of typical products, such as battered vegetables and fried pizza, as well as the presence of furniture and antiques or particular house objects, creates a specific and unique atmosphere that affects guests' experience in a singular way (Figure 1a) by stimulating their curiosity to know new or different cultures, practices, habits and traditions. In this regard, one of the guests said:

It was curious and intriguing for me to see certain ancient objects and to have the opportunity to ask for explanations on what they were, what their function was and how they were used.

In this sense, products and services that hosts possess - which are implicit in the offers of Vascitour but not clearly planned - can participate in value co-creation and, at the same time, contribute to create memorable experiences.

5. Practical implications

This study provides the three following practical implications for managers and entrepreneurs that want to co-create value in the hospitality industry. First, the Vascitour case confirms the importance of understanding customers' subjective logic, as argued by Heinonen and Strandvik (2015), by investigating how value emerges for customers. In other words, it is important to identify customers' needs and goals as well as their experiences and preferences to design and provide an offer that is able to generate superior value-in-use for customers/guests. No less significant is to align the related processes of value formation and to monitor the value created. This case suggests that co-creation experiences can be planned but they cannot be tailored because the immersion of customers/guests in the service delivery and, especially, in local culture escapes planning. In fact, interactions with other service actors such as customers, guests, local hosts and providers can modify the experience itself.

Second, this case provides a basic platform, thanks to which customers/guests, hosts and service providers become themselves the key actors for the development of memorable experiences through the creation of customised products and services. Essentially, this case highlights how experience is strongly connected to the spirit of the place and its people. Therefore, it suggests, on the one hand, to consider the perspective of the tourist because it has changed and, on the other, to give emphasis to the anthropological aspects of the planned routes, rather than to the tourist ones, resulting in the right choice in the development of customers' memorable experiences.

Third, given its success, the Vascitour case is recommendation for replication of its formula in other contexts, thereby proposing a new business model to be applied in the hospitality industry worldwide, with the only exceptions being the adaptations required by local customs and behaviours. To move in this direction, it is important to create an authentic customer ecosystem, that is, a system of actors related to customers that is relevant to their value co-creation experience. In this sense, service providers and local actors, such as hosts, need to become known to each other so that the latter can communicate their willingness to welcome guests in their homes and to present their local culture through what they possess (e.g., knowledge, personality and skills) in an authentic way. A typical reality like that in Naples cannot be replicated in another city in the same way because it would be in the eyes of visitors not as authentic but rather false. Thus, the economic-financial and social efforts to replicate the Vascitour formula would be lost. According to Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009), this business idea can be replicated only if it is based on and developed according to local peculiarities that include different aspects such as the destination's history, legends, folklore, stories and myths.

6. Conclusions, limitations and suggestions for further directions

This paper proposed different perspectives about value co-creation in hospitality management by underlining the existing lack of empirical

research about this issue. Accordingly, the process of value co-creation was examined by adopting C-D logic. In doing so, an in-depth case-study analysis was proposed, exploiting the empirical evidence of Vascitour, a social firm active in the Italian hospitality industry that offers experiential journeys in the city of Naples. The use of in-depth interviews addressed to both the founders and the customers allowed us to picture the provider's service, customer's service and interactive service contexts. The collected information supports the idea that value creation is a multi-stakeholder process depending on the interaction among all the actors involved in the experience, rather than on the relationship between the customers and the service provider. In line with Ramaswamy (2009), customers and all the other stakeholders that take part in the activities of Vascitour are involved in the mentioned process, developing a new and broader perspective of value. Unsurprisingly, relationships and interactions with the firm's founders, as well as with the hosts and locals (Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2016), were mentioned as key drivers in the enjoyment of memorable experiences. Therefore, customers' experiences are co-constructed within a given collective social context, which depends on the 'network of actors, activities and practices that shape and are shaped by experiences' (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013, p. 112). As Heinonen *et al.* (2013) proposed, the value belongs to the customer's own life domain - customers particularly perceive the value on the basis of value-in-experience, given that their reality links with the realities of others (such as family members, friends and co-workers) and company is involved in customers' activities. However, the tourists in this study were not aware of their dominance in the process of value co-creation - none referred to their previous experiences or the participation of family members or friends as factors that affected the way in which they accomplished or perceived the experience that they were talking about. Even when the guests emphasised the relevance of being embedded in the locals' life and customs to their perception of unique and memorable experiences, they always stressed the competences of the Vascitour team, without which they would not have had the chance to know and live the same reality in the same way. With reference to the examined case study, customers feel involved in the process of value co-creation because of the interaction with service provider, hosts, other guests/tourists and the physical structure related to the service.

This perspective warrants future investigation about the effectiveness of C-D logic, mainly because of the lack of customers' awareness about the relevance of related activities and experiences, as well as other activities and experiences, in the process of value co-creation. How do we gain understanding about the way experiences before and after the central service contribute to the overall experience if the customers themselves do not perceive them as relevant? This is only one of the many unanswered questions about the topic. Many others may be addressed for full understanding of the effectiveness of C-D logic beyond the field of the examined empirical evidence because this paper has the same limits as every single case-study analysis, such as inter-related issues of methodological rigour, researcher subjectivity and external validity (generalisation of results). Moreover, final considerations cannot be generalised because of

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the subjectivity of the choice of sampling, the selection of interviewees and the limited number of managed interviews.

In line with the mentioned research limits, widening the number of the selected sample (referring to the customer's world) may be useful to examine the results dynamics. Comparative analysis may be also developed by exploring other available evidences in the field of hospitality to highlight both the similarities and the differences among them. Given that S-D logic continues to extend towards new perspectives of analysis such as the service ecosystems view (Maglio *et al.*, 2009; Vargo and Lusch, 2011, 2016, 2017) and that a limited number of studies about this topic have been conducted with specific reference to the tourism and hospitality industry (e.g., Baccarani and Cassia, 2017; Barile *et al.*, 2017), future study may empirically investigate value co-creation in relation to service ecosystems.

Finally, taking into account the existing convergence between the S-D and C-D logics, interesting research issues refer to the way the integration between the mentioned perspectives may increase the understanding of co-creation experiences in tourism and hospitality industry.

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sinergie
italian journal of management
ISSN 0393-5108
DOI 10.7433/s107.2018.02
pp. 23-47

