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The perception of cultural products. An analysis on some cultural sites

Purpose - The aim of this paper is to analyze how the visitors perceive the cultural products and if innovation plays a key role in improving customers' perceptions of the tourist sites as well as in increasing their satisfaction.

Design/methodology/approach - We adopt satisfaction surveys since they are useful in order to gather information about visitors' experiences, asking them to rate their visits using a Likert scale and to provide opinion about different innovative tools.

Findings - Empirical results show that cultural products are not always perceived as valuable because of the lack of attention in promotional and valorization activities, in which innovation can have a key role in improving customers' experience and their relative satisfaction.

La percezione del prodotto culturale. Un'analisi su alcuni siti culturali

Obiettivo – L'obiettivo di questo paper è analizzare come il visitatore percepisce il prodotto culturale e se l'innovazione gioca un ruolo fondamentale nel migliorare la percezione del consumatore e nell'aumentare la *customer satisfaction*.

Metodo – Si è scelto di utilizzare questionari di soddisfazione perché ritenuti utili per acquisire informazioni circa le esperienze vissute dai consumatori e chiedendo loro di valutare le loro visite con una scala Likert e di fornire opinioni su differenti *tools* innovativi.

Risultati – I risultati empirici mostrano che i prodotti culturali non sono sempre percepiti come di valore a causa della scarsa attenzione che si pone sulle attività promozionali e di valorizzazione, nelle quali l'innovazione può essere fondamentale per migliorare l'esperienza vissuta dai visitatori ed il relative grado di soddisfazione.

Key words: cultural tourism, cultural products, experience-based approach

Introduction and objectives

Cultural tourism refers to "the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs" (Richards, 2001, p. 37). Richards' definition includes in the cultural tourism "all movements of persons to specific cultural attractions, such as heritage sites, artistic and cultural manifestations, arts and drama outside their normal place of residence".

In the current scenario, museums and cultural sites are facing new challenges. If, in the past, their role was mainly curatorial, the actual competitive context imposes cultural organizations to seek for new opportunities in order to compete successfully. Therefore, they have to adopt a managerial approach that includes both curatorial and valorization actions. This vision is shared by organizations that pay attention to the new role of the customer, even more informed, conscious and proactive. Dealing with the new role of the customer and with his/her perception of the cultural offer implies that firms have to adopt an innovative experience-based approach, according to which the visitor can experience cultural products and sites in new ways.

Sharing the assumption that the experience-based approach is of fundamental importance in order to achieve competitive advantage for cultural organizations, the aim of this paper is to investigate about the customer perception of the cultural products, analyzing:

- how the visitors perceive the cultural products, in order to identify the mechanisms that allow to improve the service, and
- if firms' innovative actions can really help improving customers' perceptions of the tourist sites and in increasing their satisfaction.

In this sense, cultural sites can be one of the main resources for the development of a destination. In the light of the previous reflections, the research is developed according to the following research questions:

- which are the main strategic factors that allow to improve customer satisfaction?
- how and to what extent the customer perceives firm's efforts in adopting innovative managerial approaches in order to improve the service?

To give answers to these questions, we study the phenomenon with a resource-based approach, trying to shed light on the strategic factors of customer satisfaction of the cultural products.

Conceptual framework

The creation of experience-based offers with a resource-based approach

The experience-based tourism has been gaining ground owing to the increasing awareness of the importance of experiential learning, which means that people create meaning through direct experience. According to the experience-based approach (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; 2011; Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) in tourism and cultural services, experiential tourism is a new way of seeing sites, participating to activities and creating memories during the visit. Furthermore, experiential tourism draws people into local nature, culture and history.

The cultural tourist is even more conscious, informed and passionate and looks for very personalized offers. From the offer side, it means that firms can use cultural elements in order to create a particular atmosphere, providing opportunities of "personal enrichment, enlightenment, stimulation, and engagement as motivators" (Smith, 2006).

Considering these aspects together, firms can effectively activate a virtuous circle involving tourists and the entire destination in a process of creation of benefits for the whole system. Such reflections confirm the importance of culture as an input in the tourism sector, although literature continues to give little attention to this field of research.

Hence, cultural heritage represents a precious resource for the community (Cerquetti, 2007), here including cultural organizations, public and private actors and the local community that can benefit from the positive impacts of a well-promoted cultural offer.

In the tourism sector, positive impacts are well linked to the tourist effects of the complex offer on a territory. These impacts can be distinguished in (Vellas, 2011):

- **direct effects**, concerning the expenditure within the tourism sector;
- **indirect effects**, which refer to the consumption of goods and services that tourism companies purchase from their suppliers and sell to the final customers. These effects refer particularly to the production of local products.
- **induced effects,** that represent the expenditure made by employees that belong to companies directly connected with tourism and the consumption of companies that have benefited from initial expenditure in the tourism sector.

Cultural heritage is then one of the main resources that allow the creation of valuable experiences for tourists.

The focus on the experience derives from the reflection that cultural tourist spends money and does not receive tangible returns on investment but an experience that provides mainly psychological benefits (Kozak, 2001) and is based on personal reactions and feelings before and when the service is provided (Otto and Ritchie, 1996).

Customer satisfaction derives from the expectancy-disconfirmation construct and involves visitors engaging in a comparison between perceived performance and visitors' prior expectations of the tourism service.

According with the resource-based theory (RBT - Grant, 1991; Barney, 1996; Barney and Clark, 2007), cultural heritage represents a resource that is able to attract visitors, even becoming one of the main motivations in choosing a specific destination (Della Corte, 2013).

Resources are considered strategic, according to the VRIO framework, if they are valuable, rare, costly or difficult to imitate and organizationally used. A resource is valuable if it is able to neutralize the threats and to exploit the opportunities from the environment; if it is rare and also difficult or costly to imitate, it is considered as inimitable; finally, if it is also used and valorized within the firm, it is organizationally exploit (Barney, 1991; 2001).

Definitively, cultural heritage can be defined as a "productive resource" (Alberti and Giusti, 2012) whether is able to generate economic enhancement for both the cultural attraction and the system of the tourism offer where it is delved into.

Since cultural products are valued in the consumption phase, problem of mismatch in the production of cultural services emerge at the cultural sites and can negatively affect customer perception (Fossati and Panella, 2000).

Hence, nowadays the revalorization of the cultural heritage according to an innovative and, even, creative (Richards and Wilson, 2006) logic represents a challenge for the firms operating in this sector. Moreover, this challenge can be considered twofold, if we add to this innovation-based approach (demand side perspective) in order to obtain an experience-based vision (customers' side perspective) the necessity of cultural companies to sustain the attraction capacity according to a long-run logic (Russo and Van Der Borg, 2002).

Consequently, the attention of cultural operators is given to plans and actions that can improve customers' perceptions and satisfaction. In this direction, the innovation is something that can improve as well as enhance customer satisfaction.

It is a matter of a complex process that is fundamentally shaped by two phases: the creation and diffusion of innovation (Camisón-Zornoza et al., 2004).

These reflections are assimilated in a more complex view as the cultural experience becomes a holistic process (Kolb, 1984). There are significant linkages between destination components and overall satisfaction of the cultural/heritage experience (Sofield and Li, 1998). It is, indeed, the systemic perspective that overlaps the satisfaction of a single element of the destination with the overall one. This is verified when it is dealt with complex products such as the tourist product one (Della Corte, 2013).

Literature suggests that there are different elements that interplay for the measurement of satisfaction. Some of them belong to the subjective sphere of the customer while others refer to the objective characteristics of the experienced service.

As regards the individual dimension, within studies of tourist satisfaction linked to the cultural heritage there is a particular attention on the antecedents of satisfaction, such as socioeconomic, demographic, and behavioral parameters (Master and Prideaux, 2000; Silberberg, 1995).

On the offer side, as it is before underlined, there is the necessity to constantly innovate. According to some previous studies, innovation in cultural firms can be shaped through different dimensions such as technological, experiential, organizational and systemic (Della Corte et al., 2009; 2012).

The technological dimension refers to the use of new tools and technologies during the fruition phase of cultural resources as well as in pre and post-travel stages.

The experiential dimension regards the creation of the customer involvement in terms of sensorial pleasures and variety of the offer.

The organizational dimension is related to the organizational structure and human resources' competences that are able to enhance cultural firms' competitiveness.

The systemic dimension refers to the cooperation between actors belonging to the same sector or to different one.

Starting from these theoretical observations, this paper analyses some elements that contribute to frame the satisfaction connected with the visit of cultural sites and tries to understand the role of innovation in customers' perceptions and satisfaction.

The new role of the customer and his perception of the cultural offer

According to Silberberg (1995), heritage products are able to attract tourists if they can be evaluated in terms of:
- perceived quality of the product;
- awareness;
- customer service attitude;
- sustainability;
- extent to which product is perceived to be unique or special;
- convenience;
- community support and involvement;
- management commitment and capability.

Experiential tourism is very personal, unique and individual for each visitor (Pencarelli, 2011; Conti and Moriconi, 2012). The current tourist seeks for high quality, memorable experiences that he/she can share within a community.

With reference to the aim of each cultural visitor, customers can be distinguished into four categories (Peterson, 1994):
- aficionados, that are considered to be preservationists and perhaps very professional in the study;
- event visitors, that visit sites on special occasions;
- tourists, that are away from home and visit cultural sites;
- casual visitors, that visit the site without a specific interest.

These categories can also be gathered or divided into other groups, that are (Prentice, 1993): educated visitors; professionals; families or groups; schoolchildren; nostalgia seekers.

It is important to underline that satisfaction has not to be described only in terms of perceived quality since it represents a simple evaluation of the service in the post-consumption phase. What is interesting is that the recent literature has concentrated its efforts on the study of the emotions that the consumer experiences as the determinant factors in satisfaction (de Rojas and Camarero, 2007).

Recalling these reflections, experience is an opportunity for each visitor to improve his/her personal growth and share his/her own interests with other persons, even if each visitor lives different experiences that favor to provide a sense of personal accomplishment (Richard and Wilson, 2006).

For cultural firms, it means that their outcome is to create a participatory experience for visitors in order to provide new knowledge and meaningful experience for each costumer.

The role of innovation in improving customers' perceptions of the tourist sites

Since the experience-based approach is based on customers' perceptions, it is necessary to start from the reflections introduced among the studies on experiential marketing, according to which a customer does not buy goods or services but offerings that render services and create value (Gummesson, 1995).

With reference to the Schmitt's (1999) five "strategic modules" of involvement (sense, feel, think, act and relate), the experience-based innovation helps creating superior value offerings that positively impact customer satisfaction and loyalty and can generate positive return flows stimulating the word of mouth/click of mouth process of their personal experiences (Voss and Zomerdijk, 2007; Della Corte, 2013).

Stating that product experiences occur when a consumer interacts with the product (Hoch 2002; Brakus et al., 2009), the interaction can directly or indirectly occur, as in the case of virtual activities (Hoch and Ha 1986; Kempf and Smith 1998). Hence, the experience can be direct or indirect (Grundey, 2008) and innovation can have a key role in facilitating the achieving of remarkable experiences. Recalling the field of study on innovation in cultural firms (Camarero and Garrido, 2011; Camarero et al., 2012; Della Corte, 2013), as underlined in the previous paragraph, innovation in cultural firms can be technological, experience-based, organizational and systemic. The technological dimension, in particular, encompasses the overall innovation activities and help in reaching the customer and in facilitating his/her satisfaction.

Thanks to the huge number of tools provided by the web, in which the interaction in dominant, cultural firms should adopt a many-way engagement approach, involving customers at the induced level (that is the phase that takes place before the visit), creating a relationship with him and maintaining it at the organic level (when the customer experiences the visit). This kind of involvement improves the development of a positive word- and e-word of mouth and mouse. The web is known as the greatest force for commoditization (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) and a proper process of promotion and communication can generate positive effects at both the induced and organic levels of marketing for cultural firms.

Method

The empirical part of the analysis is developed through the survey method, trying to answer to the research questions by gleaning information from the visitors. Crossing different sources of data, using online and offline tools, we have identified some sites in the area of Naples that can be representatives of the cultural flows.

The choice of Naples as setting derives from the consideration that this city has a huge variety of cultural resources but these are not properly used in order to transform them into territorial factors of attraction, so a study on the perception of the cultural offer in this area may allow to better understand what are the weaknesses of the tourist offer.

The survey was conducted through an *ad hoc* questionnaire, administrated to a convenience sample.

Respondents were selected by using convenience criteria, based on the tourists' availability to be interviewed.

We also proceeded with a panel of tourism management scholars and experts (nationally and internationally selected according to their knowledge on the topic) in order to verify and validate the identified variables.

Hence, in order to obtain significant information, we have selected some cultural sites of the area of Naples that represents the main attractions for cultural visitors, that are:
- Maschio Angioino, Naples;
- Historic centre, Naples;
- Archeological Museum, Naples;
- Duomo, Naples;
- Historical site of Pompei;
- Historical site of Erculaneum;
- National park of Vesuvius.

Aiming at studying the phenomenon in the different stages of the experience, which is not just related to the consumption phase but begins when visitors search for information and goes on with the sharing of experiences through the storytelling, we adopted the satisfaction survey in order to gather information about visitors' experiences, asking them to rate their visits using a Likert scale and to provide opinions about different innovative tools.

In the table below, we have summarized the main characteristics of the selected sample (Tab. 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of the sample

List of characters	Levels	Percentage
Reason for travel	Business	3%
	Congress	2%
	Cruise	1%
	Events	1%
	Holidays	36%
	Study	5%
	VFR	1%
	Other	1%
Country of origin	America	5%
	Asia	4%
	Europe	39%
	Oceania	2%
	Missed	1%
Gender	Female	52%
	Male	48%
Status	married	43%
	partner	15%
	single	41%
	missed	1%

List of characters	Levels	Percentage
Age	15-24	23%
	25-44	34%
	45-64	29%
	over 65	11%
	missed	2%
Education	Primary	11%
	High school	37%
	Bachelors/graduate degree	52%
Employment	Employee	28%
	Freelance	18%
	Housewife	2%
	Manager	9%
	missed	0%
	Other	1%
	Retired	15%
	Student	19%
	Student-worker	4%
	Unemployed	3%
TOTAL	**439 SURVEYS**	

Findings and results
Empirical results show that cultural products are not always perceived as valuable because of the lack of attention in promotional and valorization activities. Looking at the results of the survey, it is clear that customers perceive the cultural product as complex since their evaluations are similar for each question about the single service.

The survey is made by a short questionnaire of structured and semi-structured questions aiming at understanding the perception of the visitors about the consumption and the degree of satisfaction related to the services.

The first step has regarded the analysis of the satisfaction degree with reference to each single service customers have experienced during their visit.

In order to obtain useful information about the role of the core services and the supplementary services in the customer satisfaction, we have identified some components that can affect the experience of the customer.

According to the core service, we have identified the ticket price (Table 2) and the contents and explanation services (Table 3) as the most useful to give information about customer satisfaction.

Table 2: Satisfaction degree about ticket price

Satisfaction degree (Likert scale) 1=less satisfied		
Ticket price	Total	Percentage
1	21	5%
2	39	9%
3	90	21%
4	90	21%
5	67	15%
missed	132	30%
Total	**439**	
	Means	**14%**
	Median	**15%**

Table 3: Satisfaction degree about contents and explanation services

Satisfaction degree (Likert scale) 1=less satisfied		
Contents and explanation services	Total	Percentage
1	20	5%
2	40	9%
3	70	16%
4	73	17%
5	31	7%
missed	205	47%
Total	**439**	
	Means	**12%**
	Median	**12%**

With reference to the supplementary services, we asked tourists satisfaction about the availability and expertise of the tourist guides (Tab. 4), the bar service (Tab. 5) and the introduction of innovative tools (Tab. 6) to enhance the visit.

Table 4: Satisfaction degree about bar service

Satisfaction degree (Likert scale) 1=less satisfied		
Bar/rest stop service	Total	Percentage
0	3	1%
1	27	6%
2	28	6%
3	45	10%
4	99	23%
5	74	17%
missed	163	37%
Total	439	
	Means	11%
	Median	8%

Table 5: Satisfaction degree about tourist guide service

Satisfaction degree (Likert scale) 1=less satisfied		
Tourist guide service	Total	Percentage
1	31	7%
2	58	13%
3	53	12%
4	57	13%
5	54	12%
missed	186	42%
Total	439	
	Means	11%
	Median	19%

Table 6: Satisfaction degree about innovative tools service

Satisfaction degree (Likert scale) 1=less satisfied		
Innovative tools service	Total	Percentage
1	44	10%
2	46	10%
3	47	11%
4	48	11%
5	33	8%
missed	221	50%
Total	439	
	Means	10%
	Median	10%

The missed answers give us some information about the importance that tourists attribute to the different services. Hence, we can rank the core services according to the respondents' preferences, considering that the more the respondents miss answers, the less they are interested in the service offered.

Figure 1: Ranking of the core services according to the missed answers

Number of missed answers

- Ticket price
- Bar/rest stop service
- Tourist guide service
- Contents and explaination services
- Innovative tool services

Finally, in order to obtain some data about the overall satisfaction of the visitors, we have asked them to express their degree of satisfaction with reference to the destination offer, in order to understand if customers find some links between the cultural offer and the destination offer. The results are shown in the table below.

Table 7: Satisfaction degree about destination offer

	Likert scale						
Values	absolutely not satisfied	not satisfied	neutral	satisfied	extremely satisfied	missed	Total
Cultural heritage	32	5	7	5	26	87	162
Culture/food	28	4	5	4	25	66	132
Good tourism promotion	15		3	2	9	16	45
Less expensive then other cities	16		2	2	12	20	52
Shopping/events	26		3	3	14	25	71
Access	8		3	2	7	8	28
Word of mouth	11	2	4	1	6	17	41
Travel agencies	7	1	1	1	3	12	25
Web	10	3	2	1	6	10	32
Media (TV, radio, ecc.)	8		1	1	3	5	18
Other	5				2	33	40
Means	*15,09*	*3,00*	*3,10*	*2,20*	*10,27*	*27,18*	*58,73*
Medians	*11*	*3*	*3*	*2*	*7*	*17*	*41*

Discussion

Concerning question 1, "which are the main strategic factors that allow to improve customer satisfaction?", it seems that the "value for money issue" is relevant for cultural tourists, that is the value of the visit experience they are living. This issue is expressed by their own opinion on the cost of the ticket as a factor that significantly impacts on the customer satisfaction. Clearly, this result is strictly linked to the visitor's experience: the more he/she has appreciated the site, the less he is sensible to the ticket price. Furthermore, this data should be compared with the level of ticket prices in the place of origin of the visitor, since the expectations and perceptions are influenced by the overall framework tourists are accustomed to and these vary a lot according to the specific policies in cultural offer of their own countries of origin.

Looking at the answers concerning the supplementary services, as in the case of the "rest stop" service, it seems that the visitors give a certain importance to this facility. This result helps to affirm that the supplementary service is conceived as a "delighter", so as a product whose attributes provide satisfaction when achieved fully, but do not cause dissatisfaction when not fulfilled (Della Corte, 2013).

With reference to the second question, "How and to what extent the customer perceives firm's efforts in adopting innovative managerial approaches in order to improve the service?", it is important to look at the results that refer to the activities that cultural sites include in their offer.

The following tables show the degree of satisfaction with reference to the availability of tourist guides, contents and details and of the staff for further explanation about the collections.

What we find extremely interesting is in the question about the innovative tools that are included in the sites. Considering the missed answers, it is clear that visitors give great importance to the innovation tools since they allow to experience the cultural sites autonomously and to select the information they are more interested about. This data allow to confirm that innovation can have a key role in improving customers experience.

Furthermore, with reference to the decision of choosing Naples instead of other cities, the results show that promotion and valorization activities are not fully exploited. Visitors mainly choose Naples for its cultural heritage and its food tradition, even if they do not express high satisfaction on these two aspects.

However, according to the individual perceptions of the cultural product, the degree of satisfaction is determined by the personal factors introduced by Silberberg (1995) and justified by Pencarelli (2011) and Conti and Moriconi (2012), so it becomes more difficult to measure these personal evaluations.

They seem to complain on the way cultural offer is promoted as well as on the local organization on events and entertainment. This is extremely true, since Naples as art-city still lacks a clear strategic vision, there is not a real systemic offer, especially in terms of interactions between cultural and tourist offer. The destination is appreciated for its own beauties and visited thanks to the capabilities of a very small group of tourist firms that mainly develop proposals. Local governance, even through public-private interaction, is very weak, also for the absence of a clear strategy of local Authorities.

Figure 2: Satisfaction degree about the destination offer
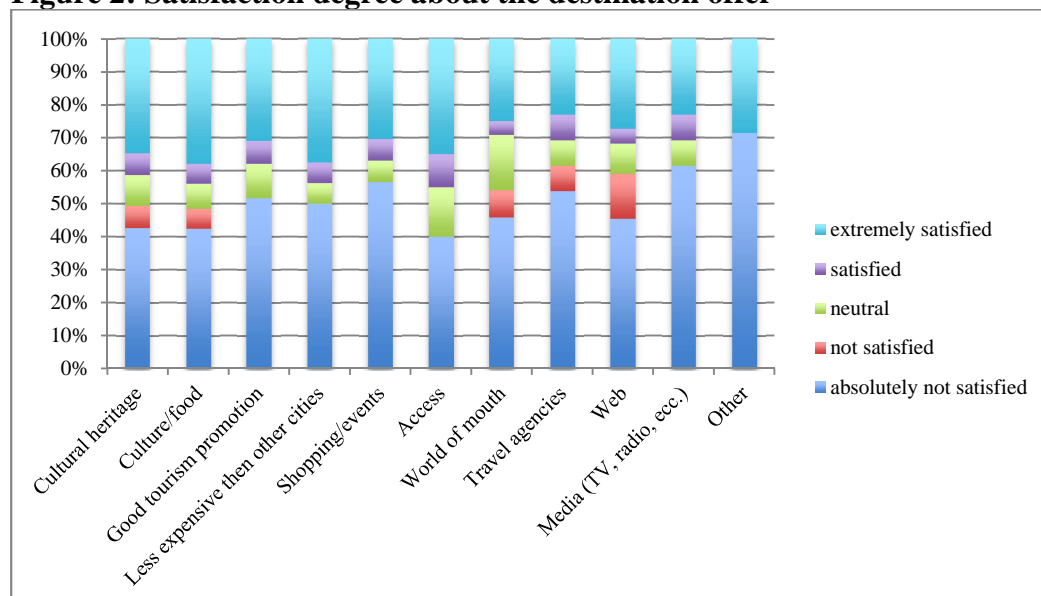
Limitations

The limitation of this model is linked to the strong interconnection between perception and satisfaction. Since the experience is even more unique and personalized, it is difficult to generalize the related results.

Furthermore, studies on the cultural sector are not so diffused among the literature and there is a lack of empirical research on it, so it is difficult to compare the data.

Finally, studies on the experience-based approach in the cultural offer identify different attributes for the evaluation of customer satisfaction and so the selection of the variables, in most cases, depends on the evaluation of the researcher.

Further research

The identified limitations represent a starting point in order to study the issues of satisfaction and innovation in cultural sector in the perspective of the customer, stating that he is even more informed and involved in the creation of the cultural offer.

In this light, the research has to be extended to a greater number of cultural sites. Furthermore, it could be interesting to verify if there are some links between the perception of the single services before and after the visit, in order to obtain significant information about the experience. Moreover, these reflections could be translated on the offer side, verifying if cultural firms and sites consider the changing role of the customer, in order to better adapt their offer to this evolution.

Managerial implications

This paper analyzes the cultural sector in the customer perspective, giving important hints for decision makers. In the current scenario, cultural organizations have to be conceived as firms, whose main aim is the promotion and valorization of their products with a managerial approach. In order to reach this objective, the first step is to deal with the new role of customer, opening their horizons and developing a multidisciplinary but strategic approach in the process of valorization and promotion of cultural resources.

This paper provides some hints for cultural firms to adopt a business orientation that does not exclude the goals of preservation and protection, but extends the objectives to the promotion and valorization in the light of the customer's needs, that is in a demand-perspective.

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